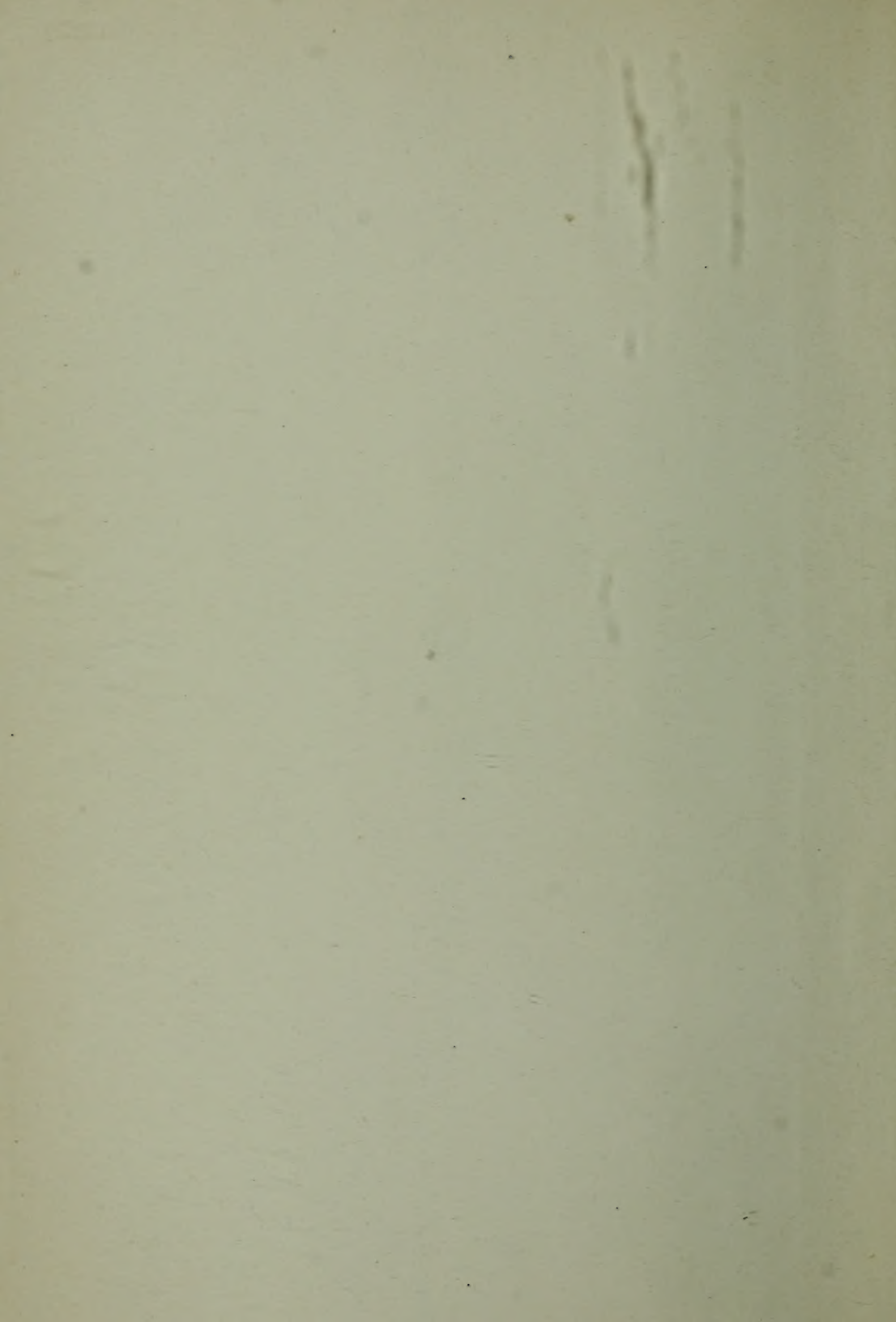




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JESUS AND HIS PARABLES

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JESUS AND HIS PARABLES

BY

GEORGE MURRAY, B.D.(EDIN.)

EDINBURGH: T. & T. CLARK, 38 GEORGE STREET

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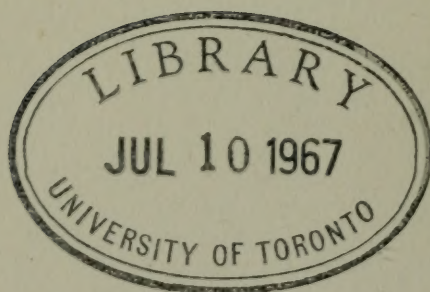
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TO
THE MEMORY OF
MY FATHER
ONE RICHLY HUMAN AND WITHAL POETIC
AND OF
MY DEVOUT MOTHER
WHOM HER CHILDREN CALL BLESSED
THESE DELINEATIONS
ARE
REVERENTLY DEDICATED

11

THE HISTORY OF

THE CITY OF

NEW-YORK, FROM ITS FIRST SETTLEMENT

TO THE PRESENT

BY J. C. HEATON

AND J. C. HEATON

NEW-YORK

1853

NEW-YORK

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JESUS AND HIS PARABLES



INTRODUCTORY

HOWEVER many and varied might be the classes of people in Galilee in our Lord's day, both Jews and aliens, countless persons were alike in one respect—they were impoverished in religious resource. The ceremonialism of the age was arid; tradition, hard and grinding. In ecclesiastical relationship, many were practically outcast: a whole host, for this reason or for that, not living "under the law." In such matters the publicly accredited guides were hidebound; blind leaders of the blind. Jesus, on the other hand, instructed in the essential teaching of the prophets, was alive above measure with the spirit that had been in them. And so the sight to Him of these poor disconsolate ones was intensely vexing. The "multitude" were as sheep without a shepherd; and is there any sound in Nature more pathetic than that of flocks bleating on the hill, in the day when the shearers

have been among the sheep? Here was clear call, at the behest of pitying love, to lift the people from their depressed condition to the high communion of His own thoughts and faith before God. This is the first point in the study of the parables, their motive. It was Compassion.

And for method, a weapon singularly powerful lay to His hand in the parable. Imagination was so swiftly roused by it, that the people were lifted *per saltum* out of a world of perverse ideas and associations, into one that was simple, human, and intensely vivid. Views of the elementary in spiritual truth became clear; lively hopes were excited, faith became strong. Jesus was at once priest and prophet to the people, and gradually became their all-dominating King. The teacher of to-day believes in object-lessons, and brings all kinds of mechanism to his aid. It was the same instinct that caused speakers for God in the Bible to fashion verbal pictures, Jesus in particular using startling metaphors and piquant anecdotes. Sooner or later, the student of His style perceives that He deals largely in hyperbole and dearly loves the paradox. On the literary side there is decorative quality, of restricted amount; but on the practical side there is strong moral purpose, a certain argument being conveyed by analogy to the hearer's mind. There is, further, a turn or crisis in the story, planned

so skilfully and come upon so suddenly, that the resulting impression is one, if not of downright surprise, at least of peculiar fascination. Things which seemed familiar before are lit up in an unwonted way, and complacent and conventional views wholesomely disturbed. This startling element has been too little noticed; and it furnishes a meeting-point for the parables with the isolated sayings of Jesus, which are often paradoxical, *e.g.* "He that would save his life must lose it." There is the same element in the Beatitudes, which tell that Mourning can actually mean Joy, Poverty spell Riches, Hunger and Thirst on right lines end in Satisfaction, and God's Heritage have as lords over it those least likely persons, the Meek.

In the Jowett Lectures¹ of 1910, Dr. Montefiore says of the picture of the Pharisee and the Publican, that it is "a ludicrous caricature of the average Pharisee, a monstrous caricature of the pharisaic ideal." This is to forget that Jesus in His teaching deliberately bordered on the extravagant (cf. Matt. v. 39-42). He is not a professor giving propositional pronouncements—making historical estimate of a learned, if somewhat pedantic, class. He is handling a popular audience by the method of *tour de force*. He pictures,

¹ *Some Elements of the Religious Teaching of Jesus* (Macmillan & Co.), p. 37.

with special emphasis, what the representatives of each class could become in extreme cases, and as a delicate touchstone puts forward the practical test of how they act in the vital matter of Worship. The effect is paradoxical. On the one hand, the Pharisee, conventionally regarded as a pattern of piety, is seen to be essentially faulty in spirit; while on the other, the Publican, usually the suspect of society, is discovered in the mood of penitence, and felt to have begun at the beginning. No better example could be given of the peculiar power of the parable on the side of its art—the handling is dramatic, the searching capacity marvellous, and surprise is over all. To describe them in one word, we might call the parables *tableaux*; and in the hands of the Master, they are *vivants* indeed.¹

Part of the art, it should also be pointed out, lies in a certain abruptness with which the story stops, when the critical stage in it has been reached. Imagination has been sufficiently inflamed for thought to remain active; and concentration on the moral issue, now disclosed, is all the stronger on the part of the audience. When the story of the Fig-tree ends, its actual fate is left uncertain. But what is the result? We look up all the more wistfully at the threatening

¹ Wellhausen says of the Semitic parable that it puts its point in "high relief."

axe. In the case of the Foolish Virgins, a veil is drawn swiftly down on their forlorn plight; but fancy has been so intensely roused, that we seem to hear the echoes of the relentless crash with which "the door was shut." As for the Unjust Steward, a sorry rogue, his dismissal is not spoken of as an accomplished fact; and before the mind's eye he continues briskly on the stage, as if taken from a detective's notebook. Think of the waifs and strays of humanity, gathered to the Great Feast; the vision lingers with us of how, when they got warmed to the work, the *abandon* of their hilarity was splendid, and joy was over all.

If the writer has been ruled in any measure by the foregoing principles, freshness should mark his treatment of the stories on their pictorial side. All balancing of rival views—appropriate to a commentary—is avoided, in order to preserve the sense of wholeness in the tales. At least on their earthly side, the parables can be marred by piecemeal handling. The first duty is to bring out their concrete vigour. The allegories of the Rabbinic schools were artificial and strained—remote from ordinary affairs; and our Lord's hearers must have been much impressed, in contrast, by His directness of touch with the incidents of common life, and His vivid colouring from the material world. There is nothing in them to suggest the Schoolman; rather there is the naïve freshness of one who lived

much, and lived free, in the open air of Palestine; one who knew people in their village-doings and the habits of their home-life. There is a richness of æsthetic feeling about them, and a genial joy in Nature, which we often fail to appreciate, perhaps from sheer familiarity with the phrasing. No doubt it is dangerous, as will be said, to attempt the adorning of such tales; but it is a matter of art and degree, to be judged by the result. Certainly, to get at the intended moral with due impressiveness, the story must be grasped, first of all, on its definitive lines. Minds not readily accepting authority-enforced doctrine can be caught by the pictorial method. The high ritualist in a way of his own meets the craze for scenic effect: why not try to provoke interest by etchings with the pen? The aim, in short, has been so to handle the similitudes of Jesus that there is revived for modern use the pristine impression of their power. Truth to Nature was the keynote in Art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood; there is room for some such motto here.

The ideal expositor would be a Richard Jefferies, grafted on a mind more in sympathy than his with Christian thought; one with the poetic power so richly reflected in his glowing descriptions of typically English scenes. He would make us see Nazareth with its quiet folk, its green hollow, where the boy Jesus first lifted His eyes to the hills. We should hear the lively market

and enter the hospitable home. The harmless dove would flutter before us to the housetop, and the hen gather her brood under her wings. We should see the school and synagogue, where piety was nurtured and intellect evolved. We should follow the Master in His journeyings, on artisan employment, to the neighbouring towns, or farther afield at festival seasons to the capital itself. We should think of His musings as He wayfared, and draw near the outskirts of the crowds, throughout all Galilee, that hung wistful on His words. The mystic glamour of that land of lake and hills and plain would be upon us; and we should feel how He loved betimes the solitude of desert places—why He climbed the mountain, and tarried by the seashore.

In particular, the venue of the matchless parables would all be clear. The highways and the hedges, with here the pass, where the traveller fell among the thieves; and there the bend upon the road, where the repentant prodigal caught sight of home. The fields, where we descry the servant ploughing or feeding cattle; in one of them a well-remembered spot, where gleams of joy lit up the rustic eyes that happened upon hid treasure. The corn-lands, green with the sprouting of the tender blade, or white unto the harvest. The path across the same, where the fowls of the air hovered behind the sower. The labourers standing in the market-place for

hire; the prosperous farmer, critical about his barns; the shepherd searching the grassy plateau for his sheep, and the fishers out upon the lake; the housewife careworn over missing coin, or mingling leaven in the dough; the steward reckless with his master's goods, and the beggar at the gate, in contrast, thankful for scanty crumbs. The vine-clumps budding on the slopes, with here the peeping wine-press, and there the watch-tower on its bolder coign. See the garden, where the stately mustard grew; and yonder the forlorn fig-tree threatened with the axe. The brilliant feast-room, to which the maimed and the halt hobbled happy to their luck; the merry marriage-party with their flashing lamps; the court-house of the unjust judge; and the Temple where the Pharisee and the Publican prayed. The world of Nature, and the varied rounds of Jewish life, laid amply under contribution: made an emblem and a witness to the highest things of the Spirit.

And what of the Exposition, the lines in Criticism along which one is to approach the parables? The doctrine that there are *strata* in the Gospels seems in a fair way of being accepted by scholars all round; and regarding the parables in particular it is increasingly held that they are older than the setting in which they are found. The modern idea of "editing" is one, of course, from which we naturally recoil—it is so misleading; but that the prefatory

remarks and the expository endings are of less authority than the stories themselves, is more and more admitted. This need never mean that the value of the parables is weakened. Rather the effect should be the opposite, if powers of insight and analysis are good, and the historic imagination is active. The expositor is like a miner, searching in a region where the superficies is rich in gold. The surface is cautiously and warily stirred, and out the nugget rolls. The story of the Unjust Steward presented great difficulties to the old expositor—it seemed to sanction wrong things, and to advise in particular a calculating kind of religion—but to the modern its point is plain, when words at the end are regarded as accretions, in which the moral was being improved for the practical purpose of some hortatory address. “Our delight in the parables,” says Wernle, “rises regularly in the exact degree in which we succeed in liberating ourselves from the interpretations of the Evangelist, and yielding ourselves up to the original force of the parables themselves” (*Sources*, etc., p. 149). And again, “As soon as the frame is struck away, and the parable left to speak for itself, all becomes simple and great” (*ibid.* p. 147). These are rather absolute statements, and may startle some good people; but I must say, the more I have studied the parables, the more I think there is truth in the general contention. Thus

the interpretative versions of the Sower, and of the Tares, are held to be of later date: a statement which does not necessarily imply that Jesus never spoke in private to His followers about the meaning of His tales. There are duplications, as in the Marriage of the King's Son, where the early portion shows a parallel to the Great Feast. The Pounds is a variant of the Talents—Luke, with his literary faculty, bringing local colour into his description, from facts in the career and character of Archelaus. It is difficult to resist an impression that the parables peculiar to this Evangelist were gathered in quarters where they had been used for teaching purposes. There is something in them of the preaching style of application, as if the stories had been precipitated out of the atmosphere of early Christian meetings. The Two Debtors and the Good Samaritan are examples. This principle of the “setting” may have the disadvantage of putting the figure of Jesus farther away, so to speak, behind the record, and may prolong the Messianic controversy, whose end evidently is not yet; but on the other hand, it increases our freedom to penetrate into the region of ultimate facts. We have three versions, for instance, of the story of the Talents—one in Matthew, one in Luke, and one in the “Gospel according to the Hebrews.” If we put the emphasis on the departure of the lord in the tale, making the

Second Coming the key, we can remain doubtful as to which is best of the three, or even think the true version has been lost. Whereas if we treat the parable as illustrative of the great principle, "To him that hath shall be given," etc., then the version of Matthew is seen to be pertinent at every point, and full of verisimilitude indeed (cf. the Exposition).

The fact is, that to a great extent the work of advanced critics has been in effect conservative. Our confidence that in the parables we have substantially the words of Jesus is tremendously increased, and even the daring views hazarded on that subject by men like Dr. Martineau are already largely out of date. I say "substantially," because one is not concerned to speak as if Western reporters were there, although the faculty of Eastern men to repeat accurately *viva voce* what they heard (especially when intensely interested themselves) was no doubt marvellous. In the case of national proverbs, while their pith and point certainly remain intact, the expression acquires a certain literary finish from the fact that they were for a time unwritten. They have rolled like stones in a stream, and become by the process rounded and symmetrical. Something like this might be admitted as a probability regarding the parables. That of the Prodigal, for instance, would thrill through throbbing hearts, and be repeated from sympathetic

lips by those who knew the power of penitence and prayer. If the parables, being exquisitely framed originally, sparkle in our old English version like literary gems, it is no real slight upon Him by whom they were uttered, to suppose that in the manner thus suggested they were beset behind and before by a kindly providence. From their simple and mnemonic nature, their freshness and individuality, and in particular the fascinating twirl in their story, we may well believe, under any canons of criticism, that they have come down to us in practical integrity. And their supreme value endures in this, that they do reflect the Mind and Spirit of the Master.

In the matter of Classification, it will be seen from the Table of Contents that I have climbed a tree, like Zacchæus, and cultivated an outlook of my own. A division, to be worthy of the name, must take account of the message involved; but the difficulty at once arises, that when you assign a parable to one class, because belonging pronouncedly thereto, you find there are yet aspects of teaching in it, which indicate affinity with another, although in lesser degree. No doubt, in this respect, my grouping, like all that ever went before, will easily be open to criticism. I have fireside readers in view, however, and as we do not know the real order in which the parables were delivered, the natural course to follow seems to be

from the simple to the complex, from the individual to society at large. There are high Christian qualities, which should be salient in single lives, and I find nine parables which describe these—such things as Faith and Love, the Forgiving and the Brotherly spirit, the power of Sacrifice and Prayer, the true Wealth and Wisdom of Life. The reader should there find with delight how Jesus in vivid and picturesque and forceful fashion harks back to subjects more abstractly stated in the Beatitudes. This first class I have labelled *Grace in the Individual Life*.

The topic which naturally comes next is consideration of any difficulties that encompass the practice of these graces. And here we meet with a remarkable fact, namely, that there are no fewer than seven parables to show how it was burned into the experience of Jesus that the arch-enemy of our higher life is the pharisaic spirit. We may never know with exactness the order of the incidents in Christ's life, any more than the true order of His parables, but the natural history of His career, it seems to me, will always be this, that as He progressed from Nazareth to Capernaum, from His "own town" to all Galilee, from synagogue teaching to open-air preaching, from the provincial to the more national field, the forces of reaction in ever-widening circles grew strong against [Him, until

finally the enmity concentrated upon Him at the capital, where on a festival visit He was swiftly and tragically done to death. Could anything be more naïve than the statement in Mark xv. 41, corroborating this? And Mark was in touch with the first Christian tradition at Jerusalem. This second group of parables I entitle *Pharisaism the Foe*.

As subject for a third class, I take, *Fellowship with God the Ideal*. Here the familiar and favourite image, common to all in the group, is communion as at a festal board, which should ever be the goal before the faithful. "The joys of the Kingdom are constantly referred to in Rabbinical literature under the metaphor of food and drink" (Montefiore, *Synoptic Gospels*, i. 327). Under the Old Testament, the shedding of blood was not an end in itself; for the offering of the victim was followed by a festal gathering of which its consumption was a part (cf. "My flesh is meat indeed"). Every day, in our own homes, we see the principle at work—good fellowship with others is recognised, and it is promoted, by the putting of things upon the table. A Feast is the intensely natural and time-honoured ritual of Joy; and Church events should be more associated than they are with the feeling of Festival. Thus when Jesus inaugurated the new testament, He did so with His blood (for Hebrew parallel, cf. Ex. xxiv. 8,

and for Christian application, Heb. ix. 15); that "blood" which was His "life," and which He gave consciously, freely, and with infinite resignation, as a ransom for many. But what we do not sufficiently remember is, that He did this as a means to an end, namely, high and pure communion of man with God, of soul with soul, in the Kingdom or inward reigning of God, which was at last to come in real fulness of power. When Jesus sat at that last meal with the disciples, He was under the shadow of two dominating thoughts: one, the sacred associations and import of the impending Passover; and the other, the knowledge that His own hour had come. What more natural and human, than to think that the root principle of the former was going to be illustrated by the latter? Was it not a typically Eastern action, to lift a cup of wine from the table and use it to enforce the teaching? He was to give His life's blood to the cause—to be the Lamb slain—but it would end in the souls of the faithful being fed; equivalent in spiritual values of the bread and earthly things upon the festal board.¹ The critics in the Paschal controversy are wrong when they draw the line hard between the idea of communion and the idea of sacrifice. The point is, that each should come

¹ The breaking of the bread is incident: the end is what we do with it when broken. What mortal men need in Jesus Christ is nourishment.

in at its proper stage in the thought. "Sacrifice and communion to the ancient world are two aspects of the same thing" (*The Synoptic Gospels*, i. 322).

And there is another distinction to be grasped, regarding this image of a Feast, as picturing the high satisfactions of religion. In the early version of Mark (xiv. 22-25), Jesus twice refers to wine; but the one reference is to the literal article on the table, and the other to the metaphorical, or new *kind* of wine, which is to be drunk in the Kingdom. The former is employed as token of "my blood of the covenant which is shed for many" (ver. 24); the other is not the "fruit of the vine," but that fruit of the Spirit, which in the heavenly realm, and under new auspices, is to satisfy the thirsting souls of the redeemed. In the one case, we see Jesus as conscious Sacrifice, once and for all; and in the other, we hear Him telling how man's deepest needs are to be met when the Kingdom which is for evermore is ushered in by His death, and materialises in highest form at last. It is the wine of Is. xxv. 6.¹ We are stilled to awe unspeakable,

¹ The evolution seems: (1) The early Semite tribes, sharing sacred life with their gods at a feast, partook literally of the blood. (2) As a modification, and breaking away from barbarity, the blood was simply sprinkled on the idol at the altar, on the one part, and on the worshipper in gentle fashion on the other; thus preserving the morally beautiful idea of life-in-common. (3) Red wine was largely substituted

when we see Jesus looking at His own approaching death so calmly, and putting it in its true proportion, as He gazes into the future. While *we* think of it in the foreground, as the cruel slaughter of an innocent victim on the altar, He Himself is absorbed in the grandeur of the issues beyond, for Man and for God. "Jesus's last words are spoken in a tone of proud confidence and joyous hope" (*The Synoptic Gospels*, i. 327). Gethsemane, we should never forget, was not all gloom. The paschal moon was riding high upon the hills of Zion, and therefore rays of light shot downwards through the olive-trees: token of that Hope for Man, which in the heart of Jesus, even from that valley of the shadows, "beats the heavenward flame." Looked at on the lines of a large thoughtfulness, the high Feast of Communion might have a great revival in our time. Man and God met in infinity of satisfaction. The Kingdom more and more triumphant, which to Paul as well as Jesus was not merely "Righteousness and Peace," but "Joy in the Holy Ghost." It will need, however, something of the social spirit which the Early Church displayed, and some-

for the blood. (4) Jesus, in the last stage of a gradually sublimed faith, would "no more drink of the fruit of the vine," because He had vision of drinking a "new" kind of it "in the Kingdom of God." Pentecost brought enjoyment of the fruit of the Spirit: the faithful were revived by the true wine of life: there was an outpouring of refreshing grace.

thing of the social method of observance, for which the Reformed Church to its lasting credit stands. The number of parables in this group, picturing high Communion and its Conditions under emblem of a Feast, is four : but on principles of cross-division it might be nine, for the three in Luke xv. end in happy gatherings (the returned Prodigal had festal joy upon his brow), and in the Talents more than one servant hears the glad sentence, "Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." Cf. also the Servant Ploughing.

Of the fourth class—describing the *Course of the Kingdom*—little need be said. It passes from the particular to the general, and comprises the Sower and its well-known companions. Six parables show that Truth will triumph, though it takes a time ; that wonderful breadth of result can come with quiet methods ; that goodness is the great issue ; and that in the triumph when it does come, admixture of evil will be seen to be temporary. It is this group probably, more than any other—with its long and calm look at the future, its absorption in the ethical, its revival of the high ideals of Prophetism, its recognition that a period for development is required—which makes so many in our day feel that Jesus can never be fully interpreted under the limits of the apocalyptic visions of His age.

Changes, however, in the realm of outward events were certainly impending, although the importance to Jesus of the how, and the exact when, was neither here nor there. This brings us to the last group — *Discipline and Judgment*—consisting of three parables: the Talents, the Fig-tree, and the Wicked Husbandmen. In the first of these, Jesus is the Teacher who analyses the working principles of the higher life; in the other two He is more characteristically the Prophet, pointing to the God who rules in history—a God who appreciates nations, on the one hand, that respond to passing opportunity, and as certainly removes those, on the other, which abuse privilege, and require eventually to be classed as cumberers of the ground. It is intensely interesting to see Jesus, in this mood of large outlook, making estimate of His own times. To master truly Groups IV. and V., let it be added, we must keep in view that the “Kingdom of God” was not an entity apart from the State: rather it was its higher reading, a subjective sovereignty. Any convulsive movement in the body politic, such as a change of government, was thought of as a field for fresh display of the divine Righteousness. Outwardly, God should be seen in Judgment; but felt inwardly also, as Supreme Spirit, more and more subduing all things to His Will. As for that other notable Gospel keyword, “Son of Man” (Aramaic = Man),

it is always helpful, on the lines of St. Paul and the noble writer of *Hebrews*, to think of Jesus as the Pioneer ("captain" of salvation), or Leader of the new Humanity, the Second Adam. We (the Children of Men) are to follow where our Head has gone before, all under the spell of His Spirit, the inspiration of His Faith. But the Head and the Body could never go together unless they were "of one," and the secret of union is Life. (Cf. Heb. ii. 8-11; 1 Cor. xv. 20-28; and Ps. viii. 6, that charter in virtue of which Man is ultimately to come to his own.) This is where the parables come in; for, more than aught else, they clarify our knowledge of the characteristics of this Life, which we as the Body show forth day by day, through communion with our Head, who, as He calmly foretold, is now a risen Power.

One outstanding charm of the parables should be mentioned, in conclusion. They sit loose to theological controversy; and this because they deal, like the Sermon on the Mount, with the great ethical verities, and appeal to simple faith.¹ Interpreted strictly as parables, and not originally allegorical at all, they are

¹ The following caught the writer's eye lately in the leader-columns of an influential weekly paper, which is nothing if not evangelical: "True faith is of the heart, and is compatible with much intellectual defect and confusion." This is surely a sign of the times.

bound to be considered neutral on many a moot-point of metaphysics. Not only so, but they come in as reviving tonic for minds jaded and oppressed in that connection. As one of the genial occupants of the modern Scottish pulpit has said: "Ages pass, and the disciples of Christ, like the disciples of other masters, with reference to His sayings, and sayings of His inspired apostles, lose themselves in doctrinal discussions, strifes of words, to which things answer doubtfully or not at all. Theology, which is fashionable science, usurps the place of religion, which is eternal truth. The pedagogues, whose business it is to bring us to Christ, revealing the Father of all, lead us to the fathers of the Church, contending among themselves. For modes of faith, it is obvious to common-sense, that senseless bigots fight, and they alone. Thus the parables are the salt of Christianity to preserve it from corruption and extinction. They recall us from all this barren or disgraceful war of words to the sterling virtue of the Good Samaritan, and the substantial goodness of the Prodigal's father" (*Salvation Here and Hereafter*, by John Service, D.D., third edition, p. 154. Macmillan & Co.). The ideal life for man stands revealed in Christ, and can persist even though some technical point in the tradition were weakened here or there. Jesus is symbol to us all of that moral and spiritual power which in Him, as the Kingdom

comes, shall transform and save society at large. Views of His person and work may come and go: forming the *raison d'être* of rival sects, which with all their learning have never learned one thing—how to tolerate in a brother, by their side, what is only intellectual difference. Intense appreciation of the similitudes of Jesus abides as the heritage of all. They are winsome in their sweet simplicity; warm with faith, with hope, and with love; permeated by a quiet power which constrains men to communion with the chief good. Not in vain has the sentence come down to us, which saith: “The words that I have spoken unto you are Spirit and are Life.”

I

THE TWO DEBTORS

"A certain lender had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. When they had not wherewith to pay, he forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him most? Simon answered and said, He, I suppose, to whom he forgave the most. And he said unto him, Thou hast rightly judged."—LUKE vii. 41-43 (R.V.).

THE native who has been long abroad, when he revisits the scenes of his youth, often finds a wondrous change. The fields are greener, and tell of an improved agriculture. There is a trimness about the fences, and the choicely planted woodlands as they skirt the park look cared for. The mansion-house itself seems altered—that turret which has budded out upon the left is new. And on the fringes of the distant hill the rising forests close in a picture which is touched for him with tender reminiscence. All of them, be it noticed, things which meet the eye, and yield direct witness to the presence of the ameliorating spirit. The evidence is clear, in that old and well-remembered

region, that there have been at work the regenerating forces of skill and enterprise, of enthusiasm and of taste.

“By their fruits ye shall know them,” cried Jesus, on the same lines. He bids us, when seeing new and gracious traits in people’s lives, accept these as proof of the active presence of redemptive goodness in the soul. They are palpable things, and we can argue from them certain workings in a realm not similarly open to view—the realm of the heart. Call it only proximate proof, it is the best available. If men see our good works, it is evident that the light shining in us, and shining from us, to such good purpose, is light from heaven. Therefore they glorify our Father which is in heaven (Matt. v. 16), assured that His saving power is indeed present. This is the burden of that singularly searching, fresco-like group of figures, the Sheep and the Goats. It is in the feeding of the hungry, in the clothing of the naked, that we find the key to verdicts in the judgment hour. No doubt religion, with Jesus, is spiritual always, and personal. But the individual has a continuous career through time, and what we perceive of him in his human relationships, his walk and conversation in the world, will always evidence the “manner of spirit” he is of. Religious thought and hope and feeling may be the soul; but grace of character is the embodiment, eloquent always of the

attributes of the Supreme Being, through whom alone the inspiration is there. The test of the Divine in us, in short, is the presence or absence from our lives of the nobly Humane. This is the truth which the little tale that follows is intended to illustrate. It shows us a person rich in tokens of love and gratitude, because rich in experience of a forgiving God.

“A certain lender had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. When they had not wherewith to pay, he forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him most?” The answer rises quickly to the lips of all: “He to whom he forgave most.” That is human nature. Both were in debt, and both happily got rid of it; but the presumption is clear, that the greater the financial difficulty, the more the revulsion of feeling, when the turning of the tide came. The ratio may vary, as between one case and another, but it does work in the direction indicated. As the cynics hint, gratitude is not seldom the sense of favours to come as well as past. If that genial-hearted money-lender met his two quondam friends, whistling on the highway, we can all hazard whose face it was that broke most copiously into smiles. It would be that of the debtor who had been forgiven most.

So in the religious realm. The heart roused to love will abound in loving-kindness; and the more

expansive the inward feeling, the more effusive will become the tokens of affection. Hard natures, on the one hand, with small experience of God's exalting grace, will be scanty in exhibitions of benevolence; but those, on the other, touched to faith and penitence, to hope and love, will abound in that sympathetic devotion to fellow-creatures which is in reality high devotion to God. We are familiar in the material world with the connection between cause and effect; and in the religious sphere, in the same way, there is a certain correspondence. If we are seen to be merciful, we are obtaining mercy. If we condemn not, we are escaping condemnation. If we forgive trespasses, we are ourselves forgiven. See a man humble, and you may depend upon it he is in the receptive mood for fresh accessions of power. Is he calm in the day of adversity, even cheerful? that argues faith. Of people manifestly full of love to man, you may be well assured they know something, in their heart of hearts, of the unspeakable love of God.¹

¹ "It would hardly be possible to give a better account of Livingstone's religion than that he did make it quietly, but very really, the everyday business of his life. From the first he disliked men of much profession and little performance; the aversion grew as he advanced in years; and by the end of his life, in judging of men, he had come to make somewhat light both of profession and of formal creed, retaining and cherishing more and more firmly the one great test of the Saviour—'By their fruits ye shall know them'" (from Blaikie's *Life of the great African Missionary*).

From some early centre of Christian teaching there has come down to us, in connection with the parable, and as illustration of its force, the beautiful story of the woman of the town ("a sinner") coming into the house of Simon, where Jesus was at meat, and gratefully anointing Him. Truly a Gospel picture for distinctive quality. On the one hand, the true and tender feeling of the woman, overflowing with faith and love; and on the other, the spurious piety of the Pharisee, censorious and hollow; while between the two is the majestic figure of the Son of Man, all graciousness itself. The name of the former is withheld, as if kindness would draw a veil over one who had led a shameful life; and of the other nothing but the name is given, as if irony declined to add anything to that inflated sense of superiority, which was so large already. He was the host of Jesus, and curious, like so many more, on the fascinating subject of this new prophet, who was the wonder and idol of the hour.

That any one should enter unasked, and move about the room, would not seem strange. Guests alone could be at table; but others in the East might seat themselves for a time at the wall, and even converse upon occasion with the favoured ones in front. That a person of her outcast and abandoned reputation, however, should so act, argued boldness; were it not

the case, as we shall see, that her impelling emotion came from a stricken heart. The teaching of the Kingdom had laid hold on her, as a Gospel preached with power to publicans and sinners; and the true remains of her womanhood were touched by what she saw and felt in Jesus, so tender in His sympathy, as compared with Simon and his class, who in attitude were hard and distant. Here was a Herald of the life of purity, assuring of a way back to it, even for the lost. She felt faith in the outlook and the methods of this exalted personage, and that meant practically faith in Himself. She had found the Father in Him, found there reconciliation with goodness and with her better self; and now obligation is upon her, and cannot be resisted, to show devotion to the new call of her life. She is aglow with gratitude, her passionate nature on fire. She knows where He has gone, He who had done so much for her soul; a true disciple, she will follow wherever He leads. What convention can keep her from His presence, carrying her alabaster cruse of perfume; emblem of her thankfulness, a "sweet-smelling savour, sacrificed to God"? Though liable to be unceremoniously turned away, she passes in, ardent and overpowered. Her Saviour is there.

Jesus reclined upon the couch in Eastern fashion; His feet naturally directed backwards, and freed from

sandals as He entered at the door. Approached thus, there stood behind him, weeping, the penitent one, and “began to wet his feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head, and kissed his feet, and anointed them with the ointment.” Her past life, thought of in that pure presence, brought the hot tears from her agonised countenance, and they fell unwittingly upon the Master’s feet. Her own dishevelled hair, which, as it hung, would half conceal her movements, was the only help available; and therewith lovingly she wiped His feet, and kissed them fervently — Oriental token of submission — and poured the perfume upon them with a trembling hand.

The Pharisee marked all this, but with an eye that might not melt with pity, he was so hidebound in his prejudices. Jesus was being defiled by the touch of one who according to the ceremonial laws was unclean. What a poor prophet, what a weak discernor of spirits, to countenance a creature like that! But Jesus in turn marked the air of disgust, and saw deep into His critic’s heart. The blindness was in the pharisaic Simon himself. Here was a woman deeply humbled by the sense of sin, but raised up again by God. Oh, happy day, when in clinging faith she was reconciled to Him in Christ! in whom were all the tokens of things pure and lovely and of good report. These were her passion

now; how can she exhibit thankfulness too much? "Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little." Not that the Love led to the Forgiveness: love is the fruit more than the root. It is the visible token, according to the parable, that the other exists; although the large way of putting it perhaps might be this—the two are so co-related, that either may be first in the order of thought, when neither is entitled to absolute precedence. Our Lord's glance is backward from the seen result to the inner situation. Clearly she is reconciled to goodness, for we have the sure evidence of this in the loving consecrations of her life.

"Thy sins are forgiven," is His reply to her devoted homage. It was a moot-point, we must remember, between Jesus and His critics, that everywhere Forgiveness can be the meed of Faith. In whatever way these narratives may be ultimately read, the Master, and those teaching in His name, held fast to the view that there was never absolute necessity for resort to the Temple by believers; resort to the ceremonial law and to its works. What assurance the blessed words must have carried to a heart that hardly dared at first to feel confident of pardon! What light from heaven, beauteous in rainbow-gleams, shining through her glistening tears! No wonder the large-hearted painters

give her the halo of a saint. What a joy to have the Master's word for it: the whole black past banished from the memory of one, who, by the resolves of faith, had ceased to be impure! Out into the darkness, from that lighted room she went, with angel-music in her ears. Was it not a Prince of Peace who said it? We can think we hear her, saying to herself: "Thy sins are forgiven! Thy faith hath saved thee: go in peace."

One further application of the parable, amplified as it seems to have been in teaching service, is discovered to us by St. Luke. Why not make the Pharisee an edifying illustration of the subsidiary clause of the moral—"To whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little"? This seems the only way out of the difficulty felt by those who cannot think of Jesus making up a list to Simon's face of all his failures in the niceties of hospitable treatment. The Master, no doubt, had a fine faculty for the outspoken; but would He pillory His host as stingy, at his own table? One form of refreshment in the East was the bath for the feet, given to travellers coming from the dusty highway; and another was sweet-scented ointment, as dressing for the hair. Simon omitted these little marks of courtesy; but the woman suffused the feet of Jesus with her tears, and anointed them with the alabaster of unguent. He omitted also the cordial kiss of

welcome on the cheek; the woman, since the time the Master came in, did not cease to kiss His feet. How sweeter far the savour of her sacrifice than the odour of his sanctity! Trivial matters these, you say, of conventional politeness; yet what large issues were involved in connection with them—nothing less than the presence or absence, in the actors in that scene, of thoughtful kindliness of heart. But Simon's soul was imperfectly attuned to goodness; he knew little of the power of penitence, the joy of pardon, and therefore knew little in return of the might of gratitude, the devotions of sacrificing love. People entering that room would have said that the Pharisee was the religious person, and she the irreligious; but Jesus saw deep into the human soul, and "with the penitent who mourn, 'twas His delight to dwell."

Love in the thousand little turns of life is what the Master will approve. It is the kind of evidence in respect of which no one can rail at us, wagging the head, and saying that things in us are far from well. Faith and hope must be in the right quarter when precious fruits like these are the sunny result. Do you feel that you are becoming kindlier in speech, charitable in your judgments, genial and generous in deed? These are qualities that come of the great Spirit that was in Jesus Christ. You have in you the beginnings, and let us trust the progressings, of

that life eternal which is the life of God. You can attain, like the weeping woman in the story, to assurance of pardon, and hear a Saviour saying, "Your sins, which were many, are forgiven; for you love much." "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace."

II

THE UNMERCIFUL SERVANT

“Therefore is the kingdom of heaven likened unto a certain king, which would make a reckoning with his servants. And when he had begun to reckon, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents. But forasmuch as he had not wherewith to pay, his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. The servant therefore fell down and worshipped him, saying, Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all. And the lord of that servant, being moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out, and found one of his fellow-servants, which owed him a hundred pence: and he laid hold on him, and took him by the throat, saying, Pay what thou owest. So his fellow-servant fell down and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee. And he would not: but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay that which was due. So when his fellow-servants saw what was done, they were exceeding sorry, and came and told unto their lord all that was done. Then his lord called him unto him, and saith to him, Thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou besoughtest me: shouldest not thou also have had mercy on thy fellow-servant, even as I had mercy on thee? And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due. So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts.”—MATT. xviii. 23-35 (R.V.).

EXTREMES meet; and sad to say, the rigidly righteous are an illustration, for they are often seen in daily

life to be void of the humane. Jesus in His new story has offenders of this class in view; persons prizing the favour of God, and complacently assured of its possession, who yet are found to be ungracious and severe in dealing with their fellow-mortals. The leading ecclesiastical people in Palestine were intensely scrupulous on points of ritual, nay, so submissive thereto, that they lost themselves amid the jots and tittles. Their glorying in privilege ended in an opposite—neglect of practical duty. The works of the Law became to them so much an object of narrow-minded and conventional devotion, that they missed its truly weighty matters—justice, mercy, and faith. These latter things, as the New Covenant taught, belong to the region of the heart, where alone the eternal writ runs; and so Jesus, in harmony with the prophets, re-sets the criticism that God will have Mercy, and not Sacrifice. In the individual who has felt its power, the Love of God is bound to wake response, showing itself quickly in similar love to Man. Therefore the awful sin is unbrotherliness. The religious aspiration, taken by itself, may be thought of as the vaulting arch, but it springs from one pier to another, and both are compact of the same quality—the tender, pitying, loving, sympathetic spirit, which is Divine, and not least so, when seen in human relationships. Jesus pronounces that those visibly failing in this

respect, however certain themselves of establishment in the divine favour, are living in a fool's paradise. The theme is the Forgiving Spirit in its two aspects, namely, as come from God, and as shown in turn to fellow-mortals. These elements are co-ordinate; things which God hath joined, and which no man can put asunder. The heart really right with God can never be ungracious in the nether sphere. By whatever amount, indeed, it is the latter, to that extent it is wrong in the former relationship. As the issue of the tale unfolds, God's mercy, when unappreciated, gives place to judgment. This is the fateful warning at the close, "So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts " (ver. 35).

Once upon a time, a king would take account of his servants; some potentate farming out his lands and funds, which were vast. And at the count and reckoning, one was brought unto him, which owed him ten thousand talents; an enormous sum, whether the talents be of silver or of gold, and yet duly a debt according to the particular trust of this steward of the state. Indolent or unfortunate, prodigal or vicious, he must have been; for deficiency is reported—"he had not wherewith to pay." Whereupon his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife, and children, and all that he had, and payment to be made. It sounds horrible

to us, but the Jewish law sanctioned this selling of insolvent debtors. The only hope for the poor culprit was an appeal to pity; and we think we see him, in suppliant attitude upon the ground—clinging to the king's feet, and uttering the imploring cry: "Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay thee all." And the king was kingly, for he showed the mercy which becomes a monarch better than his crown. Let us not forget the fact, however, that the man, like ourselves in relation to God, was greatly in arrears. But the king waived his rights. It was an exercise of sovereign grace.

Words of gratitude, surely, would rise to the lips of this servant, rescued from a dreadful doom, restored with wife and little ones to the joys of home. But the thankfulness, if there at all, was that of a hollow-hearted man. Gratitude, to be sincere, should have been shown, at the first opportunity, in the reproduction by himself of this God-like compassion. But the same servant went out and found one of his fellow-servants which owed him a hundred pence—not thousands this time, but hundreds, and not talents, but pence—and he laid hold on him, and took him by the throat, saying, "Pay what thou owest!" Voice and hand alike betrayed this bully upon the street. It is wonderful how seldom underlings, when they get a passing chance of being lords, can be truly lord-like.

But the perfect revelation of his meanness was yet to come. "His fellow-servant fell down and besought him, saying, Have patience with me, and I will pay thee"—the very words which in similar circumstances he had used himself. Will there be the same mercy, then, from one who had such good reason to appreciate its value? No; though he saw the anguish of his soul when he besought him, he would not, but went and cast him into prison, till he should pay that which was due. Oh, ungenerous, inhuman action, we are all ready to exclaim, when we see the matter objectively put. It so horrified the household, that the ruthless doing got repeated in the royal ears. And who can stand before the wrath of kings? The offender must have paled with fear, as the sentence sounded forth: "Shouldest not thou also have had mercy on thy fellow-servant, even as I had mercy on thee?" To the rack¹ he must be put. "His lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due." Did ever story illustrate more tersely the stern law: "He that hath showed no mercy, shall have judgment without mercy"?

The broad lesson is clear. Unforgiven, if unforgiving! The man who thought he had escaped, and who

¹ "Torture was introduced by Herod into Judæa," says Dr. Montefiore. We may be sure Jesus drew no picture out of focus with the usages of the known world.

in the essentially pharisaic way was no doubt congratulating himself upon the point, was found, by reason of his own heartlessness, to be in bad case after all. For mechanism, this is one of the finest of the parables, alike in the way the thrust gets home, and in the accent of horror produced in the moral sphere. Here is the implacable temper in man, and the self-destroying issue it carries surely in its train. How right royal was the original lesson, upon mercy, but how shamefully it was thrown away upon this dastard. He cuts a sorry figure, which in a sense is pitiable, but we have no feeling that justice comes harshly on the scene. The man was outrageous with his flesh and blood, and so is outcast with his Maker in the end. Atrophy and its effects are illustrated in spiritual law.

One of the delights in the study of Jesus and His Word is to see how the isolated sayings dovetail with the teaching of the parables. Here one of the noblest of the Beatitudes comes in. Clearly it is only the merciful who obtain mercy, and so are blessed. The craving, and the ideal, is communion—a coming together with God in the meeting-place of the heart—but how can there ever be communion, if there be not some moral correspondence between the two kinds of being? Where formalists err is in thinking that their sins are marked up against them on some tablet a thousand miles away. If they grasped the principle

of the New Covenant, they would realise that the register is in the heart. What Jesus, the teller of this tale, stands for, is that He would take all men there. In this sense, He is the Way; and in the same breath He shows us that it is the hardness of our own nature that is the obstruction in the way. The heart right with God will never hide itself from the woes of men. The teachers of the Old Testament at their best knew this well. How quaint the form, how sweet to Scottish ears, the run of the old version—

Thou gracious to the gracious art,
to upright men upright :
Pure to the pure, froward thou kyth'st
unto the froward wight.

(Ps. xviii. 25-26.)

The unmerciful servant was a “froward wight,” and was dealt with as such. But not before he had been shown—mark the divine justice—what mercy is, and that the king above him was ready to be gracious to himself.

This latter aspect of the matter is not to be forgotten, although it is the other that is the essential point of the story, namely, that the subordinate, by being inhuman to others, was self-punished, and lost the mercy of which otherwise he was well assured. The first note revealed in the character of the king is his inclination to compassion; and it is only under pro-

vocation, so to speak, that the tone of judgment succeeds. The king is exacting at the close; but how hopeless would be the plight of man, if this picture were not thought of in the light of what precedes, namely, that the God with whom we have to do is the Father who pitieth His children, when they plead for patience, and show penitence, and have hearts broken to a state of tenderness. The practical force of the teaching may be summed up in this: that forgiveness is not so absolute as it seems; for we must rise to the spirit of the occasion, so to speak, and show the heavenly virtue in turn, when dealing with our fellows in the business of life. To use an image from that word "business," there is an element of joint-working in the arrangement, and the man in the story failed to implement the bargain, which broke down in consequence. His own baseness was the fault. He who was a beggar before God, arraigned at the bar, and as good as condemned in the dock, became a tyrant towards others; which not only made the angels weep, but brought forth the sword of Nemesis, changing the gift of pardon to unchallengeable condemnation. The eternal law comes out, succinct for evermore, in the petition of the Lord's Prayer, that it is only as we forgive our debtors that we are ourselves forgiven.

How good for honesty, and all the pagan virtues, that pure religion and undefiled before God, is tested

practically and ethically in this fashion. There are charming flowers in stony places, and one of the refreshing experiences of life is to come across people with no pretentiousness in their piety, who do the kindest things imaginable. Pity wrings their soul, and they respond at once to the cry of the distressed. They are the last persons to exact the uttermost farthing, and take a poor brother by the throat, saying, "Pay me that thou owest." How different the blatantly religious ones, so called, who miss no ceremonies that come their way, and sound forth in battalions long lines of dogma, as if mere intellectual details in which all parties are agreed, yet go out into the world and are relentless with their fellow-men. This is the story of stories for such people; and one pities them the more, because they are far from pitying themselves, and have no real zeal for man, and the triumph of the Kingdom. They are prepared to clutch at mercy, like the servant, but have not the heart to share the benefit with others. Result, they lose even that which they had seemed to have.

The one saving source of help is Jesus Himself, as leader of the new humanity, the Son of Man. For He not only shows clearly the qualities required, but wins us over personally to His side. This is the power of the Gospel—a Holy Spirit that inspires and infects everything we do. Who so tender and loving towards

others as He was, so forgiving in the face of wrong? When He was reviled, He reviled not again. How marvellous the magnanimity of the prayer upon the Cross—the kingly attitude crystallised in our story: “he forgave them the debt”! Only when we are dominated by that spirit, can we feel sure that forgiveness has come our way. Here is the Christian motto for intercourse with others: Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven.

III

THE GOOD SAMARITAN

“A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho; and he fell among robbers, which both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance a certain priest was going down that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And in like manner a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion, and came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on them oil and wine; and he set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, I, when I come back again, will repay thee.”—LUKE x. 30-35 (R.V.).

A PENETRATING writer (Paul Wernle) declares roundly that the recording Evangelist has overridden the original sense of the parable, and forced an artificial one upon it. Recent critics, however, come happily to our aid, and point out that the investing incident of the lawyer (Luke x. 25-30, and 36-37) is paralleled by a reminiscence in an earlier Gospel (Mark xii. 28-34), which supplies ready key to the story. The stock question had been raised, What commandment is the first of

all? and the answer had come, Love to God. If we begin with simple faith in Goodness, the eye clears, the heart warms, and high devotion to the cause of Righteousness ensues. All this was quickly admitted. But just as, in ordinary discussion, a premier position being acknowledged, some one shrewdly observes, "I'll tell you an exceedingly good second"; so Jesus, in His quietly improving, deeply searching way, proceeds to emphasise another commandment, not nearly so much appreciated, but truly affiliated, namely, "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." The first command was thoroughly well known, for every good Israelite bethought him of it daily (Deut. vi. 4-9); but the second had to be sought in comparative obscurity, out of the middle of a verse in Leviticus (xix. 18). It is the original and ultroneous contribution of the Master to the discussion, that He gives it this great emphasis. Intensely characteristic of His Gospel also, because bringing into its true perspective, in the ideal life for man, the feeling and the practice of brotherliness. As if He had said, Devotion no doubt will follow from that first command, but in what shape will it show itself? Is it not too often the case that religion sadly degenerates into technical observance of forms and rules? How important, surely, to have a second principle of guidance, which shall keep people in the right plane, namely, sacrificing love for fellow-beings

day by day. On My view, this is a law equally entitled to pre-eminence. In fact, I say emphatically, "There is none other commandment greater than these" (Mark xii. 31). The scribe thereupon answered "discreetly," and in a spirit which made Jesus think him not far from the Kingdom, "To love the Lord with all the heart . . . and to love his neighbour as himself, is much more than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices" (Mark xii. 33). Thus the ruling idea of the story accords with the genius of the two parables already considered, in this respect, that for studies in personal religion the truly informing index is the daily life. Special affinity should be noted also with Dives and Lazarus, where the great lesson emerges that the merely respectable rich are seen to be spiritually poor, just because they are neglecting the Lazari at their doors. They forget the second of the twin commands.

In order to carry out His purpose, Jesus in characteristic fashion takes extreme cases. He puts a godly Priest and a loyal Levite on the one side, and a despised Samaritan of untutored instinct on the other. The men from Zion hill were all for religion in their own way, persons of punctilio in the high ritual of the hour; but as they enter from the left side of the stage, and pass on, they are paradoxically discovered, on a crucial occasion, to be absolutely void of the humane. Whereas the wretched heretic on the right side, whom

they met—we suppose him coming up to the capital on commerce, while they were going down to the favourite residential quarter of Jericho—and whom they scorned, was found to be intensely full of the tender and truly saving spirit of Compassion. They, the accredited exponents of Divine Service, elaborately miss its central issue; while he, a poor alien, carries out, in the goodness of his heart, this neglected little golden rule of Mercy and Brotherhood. The lesson is writ large, and he who runs may read: The true sanctity is Charity: yielded to God, and energising among men.

Jerusalem is more than 2000 feet above sea-level, and Jericho nearly a thousand below it, while the distance between the two towns was little more than a dozen miles. It follows that the descent is steep; and it lies through a limestone region, abounding in caves and shelters, where robbers with an eye to booty in well-frequented quarters, found convenient resort for their nefarious trade. The road, or rather path, had a name of evil omen, the Pass of Blood. A band pounced upon the traveller in the story, “both stripping him, and beating him, and departed leaving him half dead.” The poor unfortunate lay stunned and bleeding: knocked, in the short and sharp mêlée, a little off the centre of the pathway. “And by chance a certain priest was going down that way: and when he

saw him, he passed by on the other side." His period of executing office at the Temple, in the order of his course, was over once more, and he was returning to the city of palm-trees on the plain. Now if any man should specially illustrate the graces of religion, it should be one concerned, like himself, with the doings of the Holy Place. He had more of the forms, however, than of the spirit of devotion, for he omits Mercy, which is one of the weighty matters of the Law. It is in the waysides of life that real piety is tested. Here was a fellow-mortal in distress; but the sight of the wounds, the sound of the groans, woke no compassion in the priestling's heart. He moved along, inflated with the sense of the importance of his office, but betraying the inhumanity of his divinity at every step. He forgot the warning of the prophet, and hid himself from his own flesh. He saw him—yes, he saw him, and was without excuse—but he "passed by" on the other side.

An awful silence, for the lonely sufferer, came down upon that scene. But soon fresh footsteps are heard; for "In like manner a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side." As an official he was inferior to the Priest, but the emphasis is on the fact that both presumably were familiar with the moral and spiritual objects for which the Temple and its ceremonies stood, yet moved on,

as if an affair like this were outside the sphere of holy things. The one constant temptation which besets the Church is to allow respectable conventions to stifle the human instinct of kindness and helpfulness, in circumstances lightly dismissed as secular. How narrow the outlook, for instance, how unsympathetic the soul, of the Levitical underlings of to-day, who calculate piety by attendances at public worship; or of the portentous Priests, who make the vital interest of the Church hinge on acceptance of ancient codes of metaphysics. The Law enjoined mercy for the beasts of the field; but here were office-bearers who had none of it for a human being, fallen among thieves. Let the paltry creatures go on their little way: tricked-out phantoms of what religion, as a thing of tender susceptibility, should be. We can smile at their retreating figures: shrugging two pairs of sanctimonious shoulders, and hurrying on at the very thought of robbers.

“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he was moved with compassion.” The real article is coming now: a child of Nature, fresh about the heart. It is not an orthodox Israelite who shows the right feeling, but a stranger, one ruled-out at once from the roll-book of the sticklers. Cold contempt, absence of the common courtesies of life, was the bitter experience of his race,

at the hands of the haughty sons of Abraham. Who therefore could be less expected to show kindness to a Jew fallen on evil case, than this Samaritan posting upon business? But tell it not in Gath, it was this unknown alien alone who showed the genuine spirit of religion, which is a spirit of humanity. The heartless Levite, the purblind Priest, are pilloried for evermore. You cannot tear them from the imperishable record of this page, the execrable incarnation of man's inhumanity to man. The other was the "Good" Samaritan. It is not a Bible phrase, but men soon learned to call him by that name, and shall call him to a thousand generations. His was the loving and the yearning heart, without which the learning of the Scribe, the forms of Pharisees, are all in vain. Here in sooth you have the one key to the commandment: "Love thy neighbour as thyself."

And see how the details breathe of pity in every line. He went up to him—in contrast to their callous passing by. And he bound up his wounds—using the best of saving means at his command. Pouring on them oil and wine—the one to cleanse, the other to soothe. And he set him on his own beast—we see the good man walking wistful at his fainting patient's side. And he brought him to an inn, and took care of him—he was with him over-night. And at daybreak, when he hastened off upon resumed business, he gave

silver money to mine host, saying, "Take care of him ; and whatsoever thou spendest more, I, when I come back again, will repay thee"—virtually a blank cheque. Fastidious critics may think that, for true art, the details are overdone. But the lesson is profound, that compassion of the royal kind is not easily appeased. It is an all-mastering desire to do good, and to find ways and means of keeping it up. How disinterested, too, the whole action of the man ! All, all is laid cheerfully on the one eternal altar of self-sacrifice. Ye that wander through the world in search of happiness, passing from continent to continent, from shore to shore : ye that spend your money in a hundred ways for that which is not bread : look into the heart of this Samaritan, see there the satisfaction of a soul, "Go, and do likewise."

"Who is my neighbour ?" was the query of the lawyer, in St. Luke's introduction to the tale. But clearly in one respect the question was irrelevant, for the Samaritan could never possibly have asked it, or even thought of its being raised. Enough for him that the man fallen by the way was of his flesh and blood : one in agony, and so forlorn. Perish the utterly un-Christian thought that the neighbour is the nigh-dweller. He may be open enemy or hollow friend, between whom and yourself Providence has put a fair amount of miles. It was the Elder Brother of the

returning Prodigal who raised questions of history and of moral desert: the ever-pitying Father had nothing but compassion for him as he stood. The Christian's brother, obviously, is every one who is in need of help; yea, whose positive interests we can advance; a spirit and a Gospel well fitted to make the whole world one, and bind humanity into a solid brotherhood. Society's cement is Charity. How little that Samaritan knew of the stranger he befriended, and yet how warmly drawn to him he was, by the bed of suffering in the inn! All because he was the real Catholic—own brother to those whom he fell in with, on the path of life, and felt that he could help. With whole-souled zeal he was ready to sacrifice for others. He could be merciful, as the Father in heaven is merciful. Oh, the height and the depth, the length and the breadth, of Christian charity! It is like the sun above us, shining impartial on the evil and on the good. How can the true followers of Jesus draw any limit to their love, when there was no limit to His?

Here, as always, the Master endorses the noblest teaching of the Prophets. He was but deepening the springs from which the Fountain drew, which was opened in Judah for the nations. "Behold," said Samuel, "to obey is better than sacrifice." "Will the Lord be pleased," cried Micah, "with thousands of

rams? . . . love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God." Think of the Priest and the Levite, and what a warning from their dull indifference, upon that fateful day, is this: "Bring no more vain oblations . . . relieve the oppressed." Read the melting Scots Paraphrase xxviii. 3-6, on Isaiah, which should be said or sung to this parable. And there was a Scottish poet, an outcast of Samaria in the eyes of many, whose matchless lines sum up the moral of the tale—

"Affliction's sons are brothers in distress;
A brother to relieve, how exquisite the bliss."

IV

THE HID TREASURE

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in the field ; which a man found, and hid ; and in his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.”—MATT. xiii. 44 (R.V.).

WE have all heard of Treasure Trove—the discovery of money or jewels, or valuables of that class, hidden in the ground. The secreting occurred long ago, and now the ownership cannot be ascertained. Most moderns, lighting upon a good specimen, would think it the hoard of a miser ; or the storeplace of some thief, hiding with guilty conscience his ill-gotten gain. And yet the custom was far from uncommon in ancient times, among all classes. Robbers were rife, and property in general was insecure. Above all, men were liable to sudden invasion from their enemies, to escape whose clutches, coins and costly trinkets were often hastily put into a brazen pot, or a leathern bag, or a cow’s horn, and deposited two or three feet below ground. The best bank in those days was the bosom of the earth, the “bank whereon the wild thyme

grows"; a bank, it is true, which did not yield interest, but it did what some banks and many people cannot do, it preserved the capital. Nay, it sometimes preserved it rather too well, for the man who hid it was not immortal, and he took no witnesses with him to the money's burial. He began by not trusting the gods, or mankind at large, and he was not likely to end by trusting his neighbours, or even the inmates of his own home. The only witness, probably, was the pale moon; and when he died a little earlier than he expected, he carried his secret to the tomb. He left behind him no address for the money, and his bereaved relatives, assuaging somewhat the bitterness of their grief by hastening to realise his effects, found themselves face to face with a mystery in geographical distribution. The treasure was where even expert searchers were little likely to find it, among the woods and rocks. It had been cast only too truly to the moles and to the bats, especially the moles. It was what a modern banker, thinking of the money of some creditor who has disappeared, would call an unclaimed deposit.

There were those who deliberately searched for hid treasure (Prov. ii. 4), but the finding, like many a discovery of science, is accidental as a rule. Some shepherd of wary and well-practised eye catches a glimpse of the gold or silver gleaming from out the

grass as he steps with swinging stride along the hill-slope, and lives his fine free life among the bens and glens. Or some lucky labourer, driving his glittering spade deeper down than usual into the garden soil, turns up the bright ring or chaste ornament, which added to the charms of beauty in the days of yore. Or some toil-worn ploughman, not too often favoured with the smiles of fortune, yet jocund as he drives his team afield, sends the invading iron crash into the lid of some sunken chest; and the quivering of his stout arms is followed by tremulous excitement, as the revealed treasure meets the sunlight once more, and rivets his astonished gaze. The action of the average rustic, in such circumstances, is not doubtful. The prospect of a prize stimulates his native cunning, and the whole outlook of life seems changed. He is well acquainted with the rising of the sun, but what horizon of hope ever appeared brighter than this? Instant, whole-hearted, absolute, is his resolve. He covers up again the treasure; for the secret must be kept till he can secure the field. We think we see him at the work, in nervous haste, and with many a jealous look around him; chiding the very bird upon the tree, which chatters as if to mock his movements. And then "in his joy"—joy because he has seen enough to know the treasure is indeed great, and joy because for him independence and a fortune seem assured—he

goeth and selleth all that he hath. Things which up to that moment had been valuable in his eyes are only minor treasures now, and he sacrifices them at once, willingly. They are mere make-weight in this the greatest bargain of his life, on which he is supremely bent. And he buyeth that field ; both the old owner and the new, no doubt, being thoroughly pleased with the settlement. The seller, without much pressure, got more than the market value of his land ; and the buyer, who had looked below the surface, was pleased to think he had the minerals. Doubtless, as he paid the price out of a fast-emptying pocket, he reflected quietly that the precious metals could be quickly staged. In fact, he knew a man already who would do it in a trice, and completely satisfy the new laird.

The emphasis of the story, clearly, is on the phrase, "in his joy," with the attendant sacrifice which it entailed ; a sacrifice to which that same joy is the key. We are meant to see how, given the right spirit and outlook in religion, the Cross (which is the Christian emblem of sacrifice) can be, not forced labour, but positively joyful. We are taken to a region of spiritual principles where yokes become easy, and heavy burdens feel light. We are shown the natural history, so to speak, of sacrifice, since it is but human nature that people for great causes readily abandon lower forms of

good. In fact, the more the soul is aflame with ardour, the more easily, and the more emphatically, these tangible tokens of passionate devotion emerge in our lives. "Where the treasure is," said Jesus, as He went down with sure hand to the root of the matter, "there will the heart be also." The story may strike some as being too much marked by well-known characteristics of the world—cunning, over-reaching, and the rest of it, but this is the Master's art. He startles us by putting it to such high purpose, and with appropriate moral points the arrow to our heart. He gives us a thumb-nail sketch of quite entrancing quality, by which a profound principle is illustrated and enforced. We find ourselves asking inwardly, at the close of the tale: What does not the Gospel devotee do, for joy thereof?

The initial requirement, of course, is, that the individual must be enthused. And here we might take as motto for the parable the detached saying of Jesus, "Seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness" (Matt. vi. 33). Surely it would be a treasure to us all, to attain satisfaction for the deepest longings of our nature, nay, the best and only true treasure—a treasure more to be desired than gold, yea, much fine gold. For daily use, it is to be described as Holiness; that purity of the heart, that unselfishness in the aim, that integrity of conduct, which is modelled after the

holiness seen historically in Jesus, only possible by the Spirit that He showed, and which in every case is a reflection of the holiness of God Himself. This is the kingly rule of the Divine in man, bringing graces of priceless value in its train, the absolute wealth—the life hidden from the world with Christ in God. And for this, when they realise its worth, men will sacrifice their all. Freely and fully they give themselves to the absorbing cause. Jesus did this, with perfect submission. No man took His life from Him; He gave it to the world Himself, with the crisis of it all seen in the Cross, emblem ever since of the great furthering method of salvation. And the disciples, touched by His power, followed in the wake, with ready sacrifice. For the things of the Spirit on which they were now bent—eager with all the eagerness of loving natures—they were prepared to hate, if need were, father and mother, wife and children, yea and their own life also. Here comes in the most sublime of all the paradoxes of the Master, that to *save* our life we must *lose* it! “Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”

Saul of Tarsus, an ardent soul, with mind seeking first the kingdom of the truth, was hit hard by the arrow of conviction on the journey to Damascus. The scales of Jewish prejudice fell from off his eyes. He gazed upon the King in His beauty. He was filled

with wonder and with joy, like one come upon hidden treasure. And he was turned straightway into an enthusiastic follower of the faith. What was the remainder of his career? He went on, and on, in the path of sacrifice; glorying in tribulation, triumphant in the presence of death, looking forward with joy to the fateful hour when his devoted head should be encircled with the martyr's crown.

The kernel of the story, one repeats, is the buoyant action of the finder, on the head of his glad discovery. Oh, what a happy man, if you think of it, that peasant was, as earthly happiness goes, when he had gone and bargained with the owner about the bit of land, and settled all about it in the most legal fashion, and paid the price, and felt it was indeed his. And when he had gone and started his gold mine, and dug up at such a small expense his great treasure, and counted all the coins, and better counted them,—one wonders how often he would do it,—and carried them to his home, and showed them to his household, and called up his neighbours and his friends to rejoice with him, who was such a lucky, and such a wealthy, and somehow such a very clever fellow. Spiritualise that, and you have something like the joy—only a different kind of joy altogether—of the man who has found in Christ the revelation of the real riches of the soul; the Christ who has in sooth become to him

wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and complete redemption.

How the whole tone and temper of people's lives, if you think of it, can be tuned up by the presence of this happy spirit; a spirit that spells sacrifice, without the feeling that there is any sacrifice about it! Ah, that stern, that harsh word "duty," how often it betrays us here, letting us see that we are only half-Christian after all! We do this, or we do that, because we feel we ought to do it; because God orders it, or Christ expects it; because we are committed to the course by church-profession; because, in short, we are under religious coercion, and law is law. But if we had the real, inspiring, all-absorbing joy of the high-class follower of Jesus, we should despise ourselves as laggards. Duty should be complete enjoyment. There should be no pain about our sacrificing deeds, no sense of burden in our tasks, nothing irksome about the cross we bear, no feeling that we have lost something when we get ourselves to forgo an earthly ambition for a heavenly, a selfish enjoyment for an unselfish, a material treasure for a spiritual, a pleasure of the body for the pleasures of the soul. Rather, like St. Paul, we should count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus, for whom we should at once and joyfully and freely suffer the sacrifice of all things, and count them

but dross, that we may win Christ, and be found in Him.

People should test the matter practically in their own lives. Some may ask in alarm: Are we, like this hero, to sell everything? Yes, God demands the whole life. But are you getting nothing in return? What will you say, if you get more than you give, in the scale of the eternal? On the principles of Jesus, you are making the best bargain possible, with God Himself as security. You are buying with it "that field"; your own portion of the promised land, a land far away at one time, but now near, since Jesus came, and revealed the ideal life for man; fellowship with what is best in spiritual values in the universe of God; the communion of the good and true in every age since time was. Get that—and you can get it freely, if you study in Jesus moral manhood, and the kind of spirit it requires—and you have in truth the treasure which is more than gold, the unsearchable riches of Christ. Ye that wander in the green fields of social privilege, cultivate an eye of faith for these hidden things of the Spirit. Ye that are church-goers by convention, behold in an arresting way these treasures of God's mercy typified in the service of His house. Depart not, unblest by the rapturous vision of the glories of the grace of God. Why be careless, case-hardened, in the one momentous matter of religion? Why spend

the resources of your being on that which, after all, is not bread, because yielding no abiding satisfaction to the soul? Find rather in Jesus as the Son of Man, model and leader of humanity, the true wealth and welfare of your soul; the Christ in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. And so finding, in your joy, go, sell all that you have, and buy that field.

V

THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls : and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it.”—MATT. xiii. 45 (R.V.).

GALILEE bordered upon the great trade-routes between East and West ; and Jesus in early days did not need to wander far from Nazareth to get a glimpse of passers-by, who dealt in the “merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stone, and pearls, and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scarlet ” (Rev. xviii. 12). The boy had seen them, probably, exhibiting their wares, and marked the sparkle in the eye of this or that enthusiast, whose talk in some little group of merchants showed high devotion to his own particular line. The diamond among ourselves is more highly prized, but in our Lord’s day it was not so well known as the other, certainly not such a byword for all that is precious among precious stones. The pearl, tender as the dewdrop of the morning, was the admired

of all admirers. And of a person in search of rare specimens we are bidden think, one who loved to have them in his treasures of beauty and of art. Skilled himself as a pearl-fancier; for it is "goodly" ones he wants, and costliness is not a fear that will give him pause. With soul set on acquisition, he travels far to favourite haunts—the Red Sea or the Persian Gulf, by Ceylon's isle, the streams of India, or Polynesian shores. And at last he lights upon the desire of his heart, a unique pearl; large in size, comely in shape, perfect in quality and tone; fished up on some lucky day by some lucky diver, peering through watery depths into its native bed. And he knew, this diver, that he had captured a prize, putting at once a lofty estimate upon the find. But in the eyes of the merchant, with his wider knowledge, it was more precious still. It was alone in its pre-eminence; a superb gem for the diadem of a queen, one which her lord and master might part with a province to possess. Like the ardent expert that he was, our hero went into ecstasies upon the theme. Eureka! is the cry. Its acquisition becomes a passionate ambition, the subject of his dreams by night. To gather up the price, he will renounce everything that you can name; other jewels in his store seem paltry now. So he went, we are told, and "sold all that he had," and bought it. In the transport of that momentous hour, we

imagine, he hardly stopped to haggle with the holder upon the subject, but gave at once and freely the sum needed—Pliny speaks of two specimens worth £80,000 apiece—and departed to his home, poorer some might think, foolish others would assert, but richer manifold in his own eyes, happier to his own knowledge. Was he not now the unique gem-owner of the world; had he not bought the “one Pearl of great Price”?

In entrancing worth of this kind, behold an emblem of the supreme good for man, a moral and spiritual good, the whole-souled seeking and sacrifice for which becomes to the enlightened heart the supreme aim of life. The attractive goodliness of the pearl suggests the preciousness of the human soul, moving along the lines of its true destiny: its instinct for the eternal encouraged, its capacity for devotion exercised, its triumphs of personal holiness daily perfected, especially as such things are manifested in the ideal man of Gospel story, Jesus Christ the Righteous, in whom there is a wealth of wisdom, a resource of character, a charm of spirit, which is so unspeakably a prize that to the possessing heart it is a superlative treasure. What God’s kingdom stands for is the reign in us of that which is pure and lovely and of good report. This, springing from the free soil of religious faith, yields the beauty of the spotless Christian life, a beauty

brighter than ever shone on sea or shore. And though it is beyond all praise, it is not beyond possession for the humblest going. It is the one charm of high existence; the riches of Christ, the crown of glory, which is indeed a crown of pearls.

When this thought of holiness becomes absorbing, life, quite naturally, gets shaped in consequence, and conduct is regulated as if under spell. People should love Jesus for the simplicity and sweep of these analyses of His. He is the great psychologist. His picture of the merchant selling all, suggests that everything has now passed into the phase of being means to an end. It exalts the principle of sacrifice, and takes us to the Gospel core. Devotion finds expression in passionate abandonment of every lower good; the Cross becomes the token of the Christ-like life. The believer has gazed upon the King in His beauty, and been enraptured with the vision there of pearl-like purity. Eagerness at once arises to be a subject in that blessed realm: to have the holiness that shone in Jesus, the peace begotten of His Spirit, the loving-kindness toward man which reflects the loving-kindness of our God. All else, in comparison, is nothing—riches, pleasures, position, home, friends, every earthly advantage you can name, are parted with, if need be; laid cheerful on the altar, to the end that this kingdom may be attained, which

is Righteousness and Peace and Joy in the Holy Ghost.

Think of the first disciples of Jesus, how nobly they illustrated this spirit of sacrifice, leaving all that they might follow Him, and find in His presence and under His sway the precious pearl. Levi, giving up wealthy office as tax-gatherer; or the sons of Zebedee, leaving their boats and fishing gear beside the lake; or the converts of the Early Church, Barnabas and others, who having lands and houses, sold them, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet: bearing in their several ways the Cross, and gaining in the Master's cause the glory of the richly jewelled crown.

Scripture is full of illustrations of the theme; conscious purpose seen in strenuous endeavour. Nicodemus, coming to our Lord by night, longing for the light, as those that wait for the morning; or the Ethiopian eunuch, returning from worship at Jerusalem, pondering in his chariot over the sacred page, and eager to understand the message of Isaiah—a lover of pearls in the shape of heavenly truth, but not yet signally successful, until Philip as the messenger of God drew near, opened up the passage, and filled him with ecstatic joy by revealing the gem of purest ray serene.

The great lawgiver of the Hebrews, inspired by the

attractive thought of what he could do and dare for man and God, freely sacrificed the grandeur of the court of Egypt, bright prospects of personal advancement, and many a phase of fortune which men of the world would envy, and marvel that he seemed to throw so wantonly away. But all in the noble spirit which the Gospel of Jesus emphasises. He was obedient unto the heavenly vision. There was a divine cause which he saw he could advance—fellow-mortals to be redeemed—and for the excellency of this, he counted cheerfully all things but loss.

With some the stumbling-block comes in here—that it seems to be a very great deal they are asked to give up. Worldly-minded people, when asked to face the question of the higher life, recoil like the rich young man, who was eager in a manner for goodness, but went away sorrowful when told to part with his possessions. Had he been really on fire with Christian zeal, he would have turned them into spiritual value at once, because obviously an inferior kind of profit as they stood. The way of living which Jesus was revealing could turn the scale against the world. If the pearl be of great price, can we wonder that the purchase-money is high also? Can the entire satisfaction of our better nature be ever dear in terms of commerce? Can we lose, if we get Christ, and all that Christ stands for? It is devotion that we lack; for

when men are enthusiastic in a cause, they do not pull up in the middle of it, and talk about the cost. It is at the beginning, like the wise king, that people of religious principle take the momentous bearings of things into consideration; and the eye of faith shows them that Christ will pay them better than the world. The more the general advancement of the Kingdom comes into view, the thought of self gets thinned out; and in the very process of expenditure, the feeling of loss tends to disappear. The yoke becomes easy, and the burden light. Our life more and more is hid with Christ in God, and the pearl, beautified by the new setting, is absolutely ours. Perish therefore, surely without a pang, every worldly counterfeit of paste.

If all feeling, then, of hardship in the sacrifice be thus vanquished, it only remains that men be diligent in the search. Many, all their lives, are sincere seekers after truth; eager as any diver among sunken rocks and tangled waterware, for the richly dowered bivalve. They exhaust the ordinances of the Church, are daily readers of God's Word, continue instant in prayer, and fret their very soul till salvation, as they deem, is in their happy grasp. The encouragement for all is, "Seek, and ye shall find." The merchant compassed sea and land, and yet could not be absolutely certain of success. The pearl which was to be the

wonder of the world might escape his keenest ken. But the Christian, in the familiar realm of daily life, can feel more assured. Though there be but one Kingdom, that Kingdom every one can gain. The sublime pearl can be a joy to every eye. Let those to whom the search seems slow, remember that God is over all, and His Spirit waiting to be gracious; eager to guide, to sustain, and to console. Have a holy and a high aim; and bend all your energies forthwith to the quest. The Cross is the emblem of our power; heart and soul and strength and mind must be at its command. Think little of self to-day, and less to-morrow. Live for others, in the glory of the kingdom's power. Sacrifice anything, everything, for Humanity, and so sacrifice to God. Listen to the saying of the Saviour, "Go, sell that thou hast, . . . and thou shalt have treasure in heaven."

VI

THE FRIEND AT MIDNIGHT

“ Which of you shall have a friend, and shall go unto him at midnight, and say to him, Friend, lend me three loaves ; for a friend of mine is come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him ; and he from within shall answer and say, Trouble me not : the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed ; I cannot rise and give thee ? I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will arise and give him as many as he needeth.”—LUKE xi. 5-8 (R.V.).

RATHER an untimely visitor this ! But the heat of Palestine is oppressive, and exertion at noontide a burden ; so he was prudent—waiting for the cool of the evening, and travelling far into the night. Arrived at a hamlet, where old acquaintanceship comes in, he craves hospitality forthwith. But the host, owing to the unexpected nature of the visit, finds himself balked in the play of gracious instinct. Yet quickly as he had risen to the summons, and gladly as he had welcomed the stranger within the gate, so eagerly and so cheerfully he hurries off, at the hour of midnight, to the house of a neighbour, on whose bounty he

thinks he may presume. Greeting him as "Friend," and making frankest statement of the plight, he asks the favour of three loaves: a frugal meal to set before the whetted visitor, and the least that could be asked, if the host with Eastern politeness is to go through the form of breaking bread himself. Smart knocking at the door or window, however, had roused the neighbour from his slumbers in anything but a pleasant frame of mind. The drowsy dweller has no equally friendly greeting in return, but gruffly, as if half awake, answers from within on the recital of the case: "Trouble¹ me not: the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give thee." Poor man, so comfortable on his couch, to be bothered in this way, and at such an hour of night! Fancy having to get up, and grope about the room, and rummage in the cupboard, and fumble with the fastenings of the door; who knows when peace and comfort will return? So he turns with a yawn upon his bed, and as good as tells his neighbour to be gone! But hunger is sore need, and our perplexed host is not to be so readily got rid of. When others would have gone away in despair, he shows a gift of pertinacity which serves him well. Bang goes another knock at the door, and another, and another, till bolts and bars do rattle; so that sleeping, not to say

¹ "Don't fash me," says Farrar.

dreaming, is entirely out of the question, and the master of the household at last finds himself on his feet upon the floor; stimulated probably to activity by the shrill pipings of the children at his side, breaking into full chorus with their midnight music. Jesus knew well the humours of village life; indeed, the whole tale is reminiscent of the highway town of Nazareth. The essence of the quickly touched-off situation, be it noted, is this: what neither feeling for the dilemma of his friend nor sense of hospitable duty could effect, this redoubled rapping brings about. It is sheer importunity that prevails; and not average persistency, but giving the expression its full force, persistency carried to the point of shamelessness—a hammer, hammer, hammer, at the doorway, not to cease till the petition is attended to. Paradox is never far away in Oriental literary art, and we smile to think of the recumbent householder, resting on no bed of roses. If for comfort's sake he would lie still, yet for comfort's sake he must get up. Evidently no denial is going to be taken, and perforce he must do his neighbour service. The motive at work is distinctly inferior in quality; but here again there is power in the method of instruction. The argument is *a fortiori*, that infinitely higher in the heavenly realm than in the earthly, will be the prompting feelings. This is brought out in the very wording of the moral

that follows: "I say unto you, Though he will not rise and give him, because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will arise and give him as many as he needeth."

"And I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you" (ver. 9). Words these, which reflect vividly the varied turns of the story—possibly by some teacher at the weekly meetings, who was re-enforcing the moral of the Master's tale. "Ask," echoes the cry of the host in his perplexity. "Seek," bespeaks his efforts in the dead of night to gain the threshold of his neighbour. "Knock," is the incessant pressing of the request. There is growth of energy, increase of feeling, in the successive terms, as difficulties develop; reminding us in the spiritual sphere, when our hearts are hungry and homeless, and the wants of life's journey are at the greatest, that we should be the more importunate in prayer. We should be instant, yea, vehement, at the heavenly gate; ceasing not, till we receive the bread of life from One who is no churl—not selfish and indifferent, like the worldling in the tale—but indeed the kindest and most compassionate of Friends.

Prayer, obviously, is pictured here as a whole-souled devotion in the sphere of the invisible, which knows not the meaning of rebuff. If that man had desisted,

he had gone empty away ; but wearying not, he verily had his reward. So of prayerful souls in their longings, if exercised in the spirit of taking no denial ; just on that account they prevail. In the mundane sphere we are never done admiring perseverance : and it is the parallel spirit that should permeate our prayers ; all the more so, if God seems at times slow to reply, like this hard-to-move householder. In the case of the Syro-Phœnician woman, Jesus appeared at first indifferent. The poor alien cried after Him and the disciples, all of them seemingly hard of heart. But in the end her petition was granted ; with this gain, that her faith meanwhile was tested and confirmed. Not only was grief assuaged in the matter of her child, but her whole nature was enriched, her faculties enlarged. So always, of the seeming reluctance of our God. It means that His good things are not to be got merely for the asking. Our crying needs must be pressed for ; our souls, in respect of truly felt wants, must go out from us in entreaty. God will not give us His best, unless we do our best. And is this not well ? Rewards, by high decree, wait upon human activity—life is one long, earnest, all-absorbing aspiration towards the Divine. To bring down heaven to earth, we must give our all to Heaven. Patience meanwhile is perfected, humility deepened, hope chastened, as it looks forward to its triumphs.

If we but pray, and pray, and faint not, God opens wide the portals of His grace; and he who has sought so ardently the loaves of manna for his soul, receives as many as he needeth. If we wrestle, like the patriarch of old, through the night in prayer with God, and so earnestly implore a blessing that we will not let the angel go, ours shall be the answer that was his at the dawning of the day; we shall be Israel indeed, spiritual princes who have power with God, and have prevailed.

One thing the parable takes for granted—that we are wise in what we seek. It is the spirit that should dominate us, the spirit which is to make our prayers efficacious, that is dealt with in the story; not the proper objects of intercession, although on this last there is incidental instruction in the same page (vv. 11–13) of the evangelic record. The fact should never be forgotten, that prayers which are exceedingly fervent may be exceedingly foolish at the same time. “Ye ask,” runs an apostolic saying, “and receive not, because ye ask amiss.” The error, we may be sure, is on the human side. The person petitioning may be saintly, saved in thought and feeling from base aspects of the situation, yet after all missing the highest issue at stake. He is threatened, for instance, with one of the visible calamities of life; the angel of death hovers near his

home. And straightway a cry for help ascends to the ear of the Almighty Being. But God's answer to prayer may not be deliverance in the outward sense, but grace to profit by the affliction; making it a felt blessing, one of those things—and they are all things—which work together for good to them that love God. The fruits of the Spirit are the best gifts, and every one, everywhere, can seek these—love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance, according to the noble catalogue. Against such, it is added, there is no law. If God be the father of our spirits, and if we look to Him as loving children, surely we should trust Him to give us what is truly for our good. If a son on earth, Jesus argues (ver. 11), shall ask bread, will his father give him a stone?—something hard and shining, that imitates abominably the white cakes our Lord knew well in the family ovens of Nazareth (a limestone region). Of course not. Very well, reverse the case; and remember you are dealing with a Father wiser and better than any earthly parent,—if we poor, famishing children of men, have been seeking in our blindness for what is virtually a stone—a glittering and unpalatable thing—are we to complain because He who knoweth our frame gives us wholesome bread? Personal favours are one thing—treasures of time, after which we may have been hankering in a

short-sighted way ; but inward blessings, things of the essence of God, are another—abiding as eternity, more to be desired than gold. One of the last clauses in the great charter of prayer is this : that God gives or withholds according to our highest profit. Not our will, but His is to be done. To be enlightened and eager in the practice of prayer, and to breathe these desires of ours in the simple childlike spirit, is the ideal. Sense of need, to begin with ; turned later to persistent petitioning at the sure storehouse of supply : that is the essence of the parabolic analogy before us. Have you cravings for the Bread of Life that cometh down from heaven ? Have your souls, wayfaring in the world, appealed as strangers for food, and found none ? Go, even in the midnight of sin and sorrow, to the mansions above—the home of Him who neither slumbers nor sleeps. Approach humbly the door—which, according to another teaching, is Jesus Himself. Desire earnestly the best gifts. But seek that gift above all, refused never to the trusting heart, of which it hath been said : “Your heavenly Father shall give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him” (ver. 13).

VII

THE UNJUST JUDGE

“There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, and regarded not man : and there was a widow in that city ; and she came oft unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary. And he would not for a while : but afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man ; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest she wear me out by her continual coming.”—LUKE xviii. 2-5 (R.V.).

THE quality specially looked for in a judge is justice. Pity the people among whom its scales do not swing true. Stately trappings, as a rule, invest those placed in authority ; but how hollow the semblance if there be suspicion in the moral sphere of bribery, or such-like, a stain upon the ermine robe. One such we are to think of, descendant of the ancient worthies, who went out to the city gate, set up their seat beneath the shadow of its portals, and adjudicated upon disputes. The judge before us wrested judgment, and this in the way, apparently, of showing respect of persons. He had no real reverence for righteousness, he “feared not God.” Nor did he even

pay tribute to conventional propriety. Some, destitute of high principle, manage to keep within the bounds of decency. But this shameless official, enthroned upon the high place, "regarded not man"; reckless in all his doings and pronouncements. Small chance before him for the unfortunate and the impoverished, to plead their cause successfully.

"And there was a widow in that city; and she came oft unto him, saying, Avenge me (do me justice) of mine adversary." She was classed in popular sentiment with the stranger and the fatherless, as emblem of the defenceless and dependent portions of society. No suppliant, obviously, had stronger claims for scrupulous consideration; she was too friendless to exact her due, too poor to secure it by a bribe. We get glances in Scripture of how widows were the easy prey of the oppressor—pretentious Pharisees fattened on the devouring of their houses. And the terms suggest that the case before us was singularly desolate—some neighbour, possibly some relative, was taking mean advantage. Stop his doings, vindicate my rights at law, she has to wail, this woman in her weeds. But in vain. The travesty of justice upon the bench, "would not for a while"; a phrase which implies that many a time (cf. "oft" in ver. 3) the request had been refused. One resource remained. Though she had no friends of influence, and no fund

of affluence, she had a weapon often invincible in the hands of widows—the power of speech. By dint of raucous pleading, she might gain the day. The beggar, when refused an alms, has the instinct to hang on; and it often happens that, while he persists, we relent, remembering he is our flesh and blood. The dog of the desperate house-breaker in the English classic was not easily got rid of by its master, when the limbs of the law were pressing hard upon their track. Stones and stratagems were of no avail; the faithful creature would not be denied, and the two at last went on together to their fate. It is wilfulness that rules the world, and this widow had the wit to know, or at least the strength of feeling to secure, that by positive importunity she should prevail. Consciously or unconsciously, she was the exponent of a great cult—Keep pegging away!

It is at this point that the story becomes highly characteristic of the author, yielding a dilemma not devoid of humour. What is not going to be got from the man's sense of righteousness, is to be teased from his impatience. He who has no mercy for her, will be glad of mercy for himself, and take it on the only possible terms—that of granting her request. How clear and easy the parable would linger in the early Christian memory—picture the widow harp, harping on the one string, till she

made the Gallio sing the chorus of her song. "Afterward," it is said of the consent; and we feel that a good deal of silent history is covered by the word. It suggests pleading after pleading. When his lordship took his seat upon the bench, what did he see, but her dreary yet determined face, and hear the shrill sound once more of her voice, beginning the intolerable tale. "Afterward he said within himself, Though I fear not God, nor regard man; yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest she wear me out by her continual coming" (vv. 5, 6). Not a lofty motive, we at once perceive; but it is a worldling we are dealing with, and the contrast will be all the greater in the spiritual sphere, where infinitely higher feelings and reasons are at work. There is something about this story which suits the cynic-minded generation of to-day. As we see from the unblushing talk "within himself," the rights and wrongs of the business were neither here nor there. It would be all the same a hundred years hence. One thing which he fully weighed and understood, was his own comfort; and if not as a lawyer, at least as a man, he should consult that. It was not that he troubled himself about the plaintiff's case, but that she troubled him. This wretched woman, he virtually says, is a perfect pest; a sturdy bore who is evidently going to keep it up. I can stand it no longer. She will "wear

me out"; or, as some more literally render it, she may bruise me. So he cut the difficulty by granting her request, and the widow was avenged. Perseverance was rewarded, as perseverance, long enough continued, generally is. Brooding care flew quickly from her countenance. She received justice from the Unjust Judge.

The parallel is absolute, that ardour in the spiritual world will succeed as surely as in the nether sphere. If by prayer be meant that looking towards God which should be constant in our life, then the saying, "Pray without ceasing," contains not an atom of hyperbole. The aspirations of the inward man possess, ideally, the ceaseless note of being fervent, confident, and joyous. The greater the stress and storm, the more the soul at its best goes clinging to the Rock of Ages. Men, according to the opening verse, "ought always to pray, and not to faint." And *a fortiori* the Judge upon our side is righteous, though to despairing hearts at times the baring of His arm seems slow. The Lord is not slack as some men count slackness; his long-suffering is salvation. To those possessed of the first requirement in religion—faith in the Divine Power—delay can only be in the seeming. For all who have the right spirit, it is more and more a truth, that Hope springs eternal in the human breast. Who so weak and helpless as that lone widow? Yet what power

there was in the weapon which she held—a weapon none could take away, the passion for justice, the intensity of prayer! How vehement it grew, though frowning barriers rose the while! It was like the mountain torrent, which gathers force as it goes, and carries all before it to the sea.

The Early Christians, as we see from certain added verses, came to apply the story, after the death of Jesus, to their own case, in the sweltering times of persecution. The woman was the Church, widowed by her Lord's death; a long-suffering plaintiff, who was the sport of obloquy and cruel hardships in the world. Her prayer was the cry of the faithful, longing for Christ's return: "Come, Lord Jesus." And no doubt this adaptation was as edifying to its own age as it was natural. For all touched with the abiding spirit of prayer, there could be but one answer: "Shall not God avenge his elect,"—those specially an object of the divine purpose in providence,—"which cry to him day and night, and he is long-suffering over them?" (ver. 7), *i.e.* restrained in emotion, seeming to defer His deliverance of those oppressed with injustice. "I say unto you, that he will avenge them speedily" (ver. 8). Stern was the struggle of the saints, with no "days of the Son of Man" to be descried in the near future. But what a field, straightway, for the virtue of patience, the triumph of prayer! To the believing

heart, the final issue could never be in doubt. It was sure as the counsel of the Eternal, steadfast as the character of God.

The closing words of this primitive application bring the teaching back to the universal value of to-day—"Howbeit when the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" (ver. 8). We debate about prayer, and wonder whether God will be faithful to reply; but the real doubt is whether *we* shall be faithful in the exercise. In any earthly matter, if we are bent on success, we throw ourselves heart and soul into the business (cf. the moral of the Unjust Steward). So in the religious realm, fervour is the secret. We should look and long and strive, like that untiring woman, however dead against us appearances may be. One thing that need never fail us is the Holy Spirit, God-given, as a perennial spring of grace for man within the heart. If we appear to be kept waiting at times for answer, like messengers at human doors, the pause is shorter than we think; and it is not for us as humble mortals to chafe and be impatient. We can sound again. "Knock, and it shall be opened unto you," is the Gospel encouragement. It is grace of character, extension of the reign of God, we are out for; and that, like Rome, is not built in a day. Religion is not a magical affair. Great Nature, for her choicest fruits, requires the round of the seasons. And God has

methods of His own; quite startling, and not less efficacious on that account, may be some of the replies to our requests. Keep me humble, keep me humble, may be night and day your cry. What if God answers, I will humble you. I will bring you low before the world! Oh, that I were pure in heart, you exclaim, for then should I see God! Very well, saith He who reigns above, away to the fiery furnace, the hot blast of affliction; that will purify your dross, and bring refinement to your soul. Withhold not, therefore, amid besetting doubt, and in the vale of shadows, the prayers and deepest longings of your hearts. Trust the loving-kindness of your God, His infinity of power, the boundless treasures of His grace. "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord."

VIII

THE UNJUST STEWARD

“There was a certain rich man, which had a steward ; and the same was accused unto him that he was wasting his goods. And he called him, and said unto him, What is this that I hear of thee? render the account of thy stewardship ; for thou canst be no longer steward. And the steward said within himself, What shall I do, seeing that my lord taketh away the stewardship from me? I have not strength to dig ; to beg I am ashamed. I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses. And calling to him each one of his lord’s debtors, he said to the first, How much owest thou unto my lord? And he said, A hundred measures of oil. And he said unto him, Take thy bond, and sit down quickly and write fifty. Then said he to another, And how much owest thou? And he said, A hundred measures of wheat. He saith unto him, Take thy bond, and write fourscore. And his lord commended the unrighteous steward because he had done wisely : for the sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of the light.”—LUKE xvi. 1-8 (R.V.).

THERE is a fine boldness about this story. The pietist flies from what he calls slightly the world, and the ritualist gets divorced disastrously from daily life in the more active sphere ; but robust religion rejoices to see every human interest penetrated by its power. Jesus not only does not flee the world, but

turns it to account in a way at which some are astonished. He holds up as ensample the wisdom of a knave, albeit a wisdom we are to apply to better purpose and in higher things. Those who marvel at this, forget that Jesus had the preacher's instinct of startling His hearers into wholesome thought. His deepest sayings run to paradox. He could have taken a more respectable figure from society: one showing the decision of character held up in the picture as a model for translation to divine affairs. But the thing is more rousing, more piquant, as it stands; and therefore more potent in the matter of edification, which was the object in view. According to modern scholars the parable properly ends with the eighth verse.¹ Jesus is commending the resource and resolution which are so often exhibited in mundane affairs. Would that these striking qualities, He urges, were as actively employed in promoting the glorious reign of God. The grandest possible results for the Kingdom should ensue. But unfortunately "the sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of the light" (ver. 8).

"There was a certain rich man, which had a steward." Two figures move quickly on the stage: the one a

¹ One can see psychologically how the accretion of ver. 9 arose. A speaker at the weekly meetings, improving prosaically on the moral, wrought out a parallel between the "houses" of the steward's friends and the "tabernacles" of the spiritual world.

wealthy owner, living apparently at a distance from his possession, and the other his local overseer, a man gifted with alert and shrewd faculty, although in the moral sphere unprincipled. He abused flagrantly the confidence of his master. A free and genial soul to those beneath him, and just as falsely kind to himself, all at the expense of his lord's revenue. Personal extravagance seems the key to his character. Confronted with his employer, "accused unto him that he was wasting his goods," he stands convicted, and is silent when the question comes, "What is this that I hear of thee?" Deprivation follows forthwith: "Render the account of thy stewardship; for thou canst be no longer steward." The critical point in his career has come, for he is menaced by misery. Recklessness had become a habit, and he has laid up nothing. "What shall I do," he asks himself desperately, on realising that ruin has him in the wind, "seeing that my Lord taketh away the stewardship from me? I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed." Though he could stoop to knavery, he cannot unbend to be the honest day-labourer. Morally, not physically, his hands are to be soiled. There is pathos in the literal rendering of his confession: "I have not strength to dig." As for the other opening, how could one of his lordly carriage put on the mendicant's whine? Though he was far from upright, enough of pride remained to keep

him from going down to that—"to beg I am ashamed." But if not a man of muscle, he was a man of brain, and in the dire dilemma his characteristic sagacity comes out. A clever scheme suggests itself, and as the bright idea strikes him, he cries, "I have it! I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses." Every trade tends to develop tricks of its own, especially tricks which cannot be challenged at law, however shady in themselves. The steward has been ordered, on the giving up of his stewardship, to prepare an inventory of accounts, and arrange in general for the handing over of affairs. Why not throw a sop to some, while yet the master's money is at his tender mercy? Their favour for the future should in that case be propitiated. The vulgar form of theft is to pick up odd monies, and decamp. But our steward had a dainty touch. He believes in a business with good-will. The safest bank, he perceives, will be some grateful friends. The doings of a steward, be it remembered, are largely arbitrary; and in fixing values there is a margin on which his judgment can come and go. The action may be essentially theft, but within certain limits he is technically free of prosecution. Every great man's underling, dealing with people lower down than himself, may fix prices poorer than the market average, and there is nobody to say him nay.

Our steward was an adept at this art. He summoned every one of his lord's debtors, to count and reckon with him for the last time—merchants, we may imagine, who got supplies of goods on credit, with bills to stand against them till sales could be effected; or tenants simply, who paid rent in kind, the keeper of an olive-yard, for instance, paying the owner a percentage of oil in the year.

To the first debtor who approached, he said, "How much owest thou unto my lord?" "A hundred measures (*baths*) of oil." "Take thy bond," said the steward, "and sit down quickly, and write fifty." In that word "quickly" we seem to see the promptness of the man, if not a suspicion of nervous haste. There might be a trembling of the hand, as the voucher passed for alteration of the figure. In the same way, a reduction was entered on the bill of another, a dealer in grain. "Write fourscore," he said to the debtor of a hundred measures (*cors*). The proportion apparently varies. The steward knows his men, and knows their price; supplying another indication, possibly, of the acuteness of our hero.

But the knavery of even the cleverest knaves is not safe from discovery, and somehow the fame of the smartness of the steward got abroad. It reached his master's ears, and afforded parting proof, as it were, of that ability which had secured him office at first.

The tactics clearly were unscrupulous, and yet compelled admiration of a kind. The master, we must not forget, was a man of the world himself, and had enough of humour to note his servant's wit. Not that this was probably the earliest and strongest feeling, but it was there. "His lord (landlord) commended the unrighteous steward because he had done wisely" (ver. 8). It may have been only the skill which one admires in a forger and a thief, or a certain prudence of outlook connected therewith. But there was something like genius in the cool daring of the man, who was determined not to be caught. He tided his fortunes through a great crisis. He was quick to see, smart to plan, prompt to carry out. Lay aside for the moment the high question of morals, the postulates of honesty and common honour, and remember you are dealing with a story of the world, marked by the ways of the world ("unrighteousness"), and you can appreciate at once the master's large-eyed commendation of the man. He was a long-headed fellow, who, when times were pressing and opportunity was small, extricated himself very deftly from his difficulty—he was a man of resolution and resource. "For the sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of the light."

Would that in religious matters, Jesus means, these same qualities were as conspicuous! Would that the

children of light brought their acts as truly into harmony with their ideals, and so rivalled, in that regard, the children of darkness! But as a rule it is not so. People rarely put their mind and heart and purpose into things spiritual, as much as into things temporal. Look at the man of business, bent on gaining all that in earthly moods ambition craves. His whole soul is concentrated on the amassing of money. He rises early and works late. Holidays are few, toil ardent and long. Week in, week out, he saves and saves, and schemes and plans, and plans again, and succeeds visibly to a wonderful extent. He knows what he would be at, and drives straight to the point. The underlings of his office know well the strident call, "It must be done." But compare with this men's action, or rather want of action, regarding the riches of the soul, the graces of the Christian heart, the state of spiritual being more to be desired than gold. The religious man dreams while the man of the world acts. How faint, comparatively speaking, are even conscious followers of Jesus in a nobler cause. Faith is enfeebled, and hope gets depressed, and love waxes selfish and cold. What failures in the time of crisis, what want of steadfast resolve, what poverty of performance, as against blatant profession!

It is a matter of devotion; and so the practical evidence of this in daily life will be the standard of

measurement before God. The quest of fortune has been cited as an illustration; but take even an ordinary game. There people have a zeal they never show in pursuit of a lost soul, or the advocacy of a mission cause. For a popular war, citizens will give freely of their best in sacrifice, patriotic feeling rising to a white heat. But for the far greater conflict with heathenism in society, at home and abroad, there is nothing like the same readiness to spend and be spent. Rather there is downright slackness, and that want of intelligent interest which aggravates slackness. Knowledge is always a preliminary to appreciation, though it may take more than knowledge to kindle enthusiasm to its height. When the Church becomes more an agent of enlightenment, great will be the gain. Be the reasons, however, what they may, the fact remains that, for the seizing of passing opportunity, we are less marked by persevering earnestness, and willingness to sacrifice, in things eternal and invisible, than in the fleeting things of time and sense. Training is the cry all round—physical, intellectual, technical. Nowhere on the secular side is it neglected. But what of ethics; the schooling of the passions, the education of the soul? The latter is just as vitally important as the former. But public men incline to shrug their shoulders, and say, We won't meddle with that. Saturday afternoon, the crowd was furiously

keen on sport. How many of them, when Sabbath dawns, will respond as zealously to the call for God's worship in His house of prayer? The body with its whims—its fantasies of food and raiment—is not allowed to suffer. But the soul may be on half-rations, for days and months together, or live like the prodigal on husks, and famish in the far land. How true, how deep-cutting, the moral of the Master's tale; "The sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of the light."

IX

THE RICH FOOL

“The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully : and he reasoned within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have not where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do : I will pull down my barns, and build greater ; and there will I bestow all my corn and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years ; take thine ease, eat, drink, be merry. But God said unto him, Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee ; and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”—LUKE xii. 16-21 (R.V.).

EARTHLY objects fill the eye, and seem to the young and the uninstructed the chief end of existence. The superficial come to think mechanically that poverty spells misery, and that it is “possessions” which bring happiness. The religious are those who, after being tempted to make an idol of mundane success for its own sake, discover that hollowness is writ large on the general position. For them the true riches are within ; and only those with the spiritual mind have that Life indeed on which Death lays no arresting hand. Our Lord’s new story is an inimitable picture of a worldly

mindful man, full of the shallow complacency of his class, being made to realise the essential vanity of his position. We see him in the power and glory of his flourishing estate; death comes in with a crash; and as we follow him in imagination to the judgment-seat, we perceive that, though he seemed to have gotten "riches, and to have need of nothing," yet was he "the wretched one, and miserable, and poor" (Rev. iii. 17).

Some tiller of the soil we think of, his prosperity so great that he is in straits for its accommodation. But with keen people this is never an insuperable difficulty, to know where to put their gain. And so the man's decision of character comes out at once. "I will pull down my barns," he cries, launching the new enterprise, "and build greater; and there will I bestow all my corn and my goods."

There is no reflection, be it noticed, on the goodness of the business plan. Jesus is not ventilating agricultural criticisms. Nor is there any suggestion of wickedness about the man himself. He was blameless to the conventional eye. No deceiver at a bargain, no plunderer of the helpless; but laborious and shrewd; an instance from the world of social fact, that honourable industry can find the reward of this world—abundance of possessions.

The emphasis is on the fact that as regards the

stability of his position, and the nether aims he has in view, the worldling was complacent, as worldlings naturally are. In the even flow of his prosperity, he practically thinks it is going to go on for ever. He bids his soul rely on the "much goods laid up for many years," and take its ease. "Eat," he says purringly, noting one supreme pleasure of the worldling; "drink," which with some is even more a pleasure; and "be merry," in the most approved fashion. We all recognise the portrait; it has been on exhibition since the world was.

But it is the unexpected that happens, and the vanity of human wishes has passed into a proverb. The man was suddenly called to his account—the keystone knocked clean out of his bridge, his castle found to be only in the air! That day the farmer stepped about his fields, and gave his orders to his slaves. But that very evening he was on his death-bed. When morrow dawned, his barns would stand unaltered, there should be silence in his darkened home. Disease or disaster laid him low, and what were all his goods to him now? Shrivelled into nothingness, huddled into a paltry heap there! What worth to him his broad acres? A few feet sufficient—a lone corner in the place of the dead! Earth was to open upon him; only Eternity remained.

There is nothing in the story out of the ordinary

course of things. Such occurrences are constantly chronicled in the daily press. The strong man, without the slightest warning, bows himself and falls: the prosperous pass away in the midst of their pride. With riches still coming to the garner, life itself ebbs away from our frame. Our candle is quenched, our life seen to be but vapour, and we vanish away!

But what of the poor worldling, when he felt his soul was departing? One thought might well flash, with lightning clearness, through his carnal mind—the thought of his destitution before God, who was speaking terribly to him now. His conscience, with no source of succour in its empty barns, brought him bare into the presence of his Maker, and he heard the stern decree: “Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee; and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be?” There the shivering soul is left; for Jesus, true to the genius of the parable, stops when the startling crisis of the tale is reached. The hearer perforce, however, has to go on, in the kindled realm of his own imagination. We are carried to the bar of the Eternal, where real spiritual values are appraised, and though there is no formal answer in the story, we are constrained to give the answer ourselves—our lips moving, so to speak, as we follow what we feel to be the sentence of the Judge. The

man has no possessions now—the earthly ones are gone, and in their place none spiritual can be discovered. “So is he,” said Jesus, with the throb of sadness in His voice,—this is his utter destitution, his condign confusion in the unseen world,—“that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God” (ver. 21).

Clearly, there were other things which he might have “prepared”; and a different ideal of life which he might have gone by. If he had cultivated the spiritual kind of wealth, certain precious fruits of the Spirit would have been the harvested result. For such things he had store-places ready-made in the homes of the poor, in the hearts of his neighbours, in the ever-present needs of forlorn humanity. But this required that he should be unselfish and sacrificing, whereas he was covetous, thoughtless about others, centring everything in himself. The most sacred portion of his universe was the barn-yard, and his charity was to end where it began—strictly at home. We perceive at once that his favourite pronoun was the possessive—my corn, my goods, my barns, my soul, my everything. The only owner was the great I, and he was proud to possess them, although, poor man, he was in reality possessed by them. To what a small extent, and in what a delusive sense, he had “possession” the sequel of the story shows. The

contrast is emphatic throughout between the man's own views and the terms of the divine challenge. The one talked of many years; the other said, This night. The one spoke of the soul as if it were his own; the other with authority announced that He required it, for purposes of weighing in the balance. The one fancied he had great foresight, scheming about his barns; the other crushingly summarised him as foolish. The one made mention of his much goods; the other virtually declared him a bankrupt. "The things which thou hast prepared," he was asked, in derision of his beggarly condition, "whose shall they be?" (cf. Ps. xlix., which we may well believe Jesus cherished).

Let no one think, however, that prosperity as such is condemned. Piety may be linked with it as well as with poverty. Everything depends on the uses to which the items of prosperity are put; the lofty aim, the practical consecration, in glowing social endeavour. But in the merely respectable figure before us, no microscope could discover traces of truly noble character. He was an illustration of the ancient saying, that the prosperity of fools shall destroy them. The giving to the poor, which is lending to the Lord, was mere mystery to him. Life, he virtually said, does consist in the abundance of the things which we possess. Enthusiasm for humanity, concern for the coming of the Kingdom, devotion to the pure and

beautiful and good, these were neglected. He sowed only to the world, how could he reap riches in the Spirit? It is the working of psychological law—where the treasure is, there will the heart be also.

Think of the case of Him who uttered the tale: a peasant from the hills of Galilee; unappreciated by those who seemed to be somewhat; outcast and oppressed; executed at the last as a criminal. Foxes had holes, birds of the air had nests, but the Son of Man had not where to lay His head. The inventory of His earthly effects was nil. Yet who so rich as He was toward God? Laying out His life for others—losing it that He might find it—continually doing good. The leader, therefore, the leader for ever, of those who are the heirs with Him of the deathless inheritance, the treasure in the heavens that faileth not.

“Everything in Jesus,” says Bousset,¹ “is aimed at the highest and ultimate goal: nowhere is there any slackening or trifling or pursuit of side-issues. Piety informs His life like a never-failing electric current, flowing with quiet and even force through His soul, free from all hindrance and distraction. At certain points indeed a stronger tension may be observed, and the sparks leap up with destroying energy. . . . He was conscious of the greatest antithesis to His

¹ Bousset's *Jesus*, chap. vi.

being when He came across some purely worldly life, given up to the present with its unrest, divisions, and confusions. He scourged it in many a vigorous parable. 'Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee: and the things which thou hast prepared, whose shall they be?' To His disciples He taught above all things the great *Sursum corda*, the wealth of the heart in God. He sought to lift them into His own sphere, to which the cares and calculations of the world, and the noise and trouble of every day, were unable to penetrate."

X

THE PHARISEE AND THE PUBLICAN

“Two men went up into the temple to pray ; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as the rest of men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week ; I give tithes of all that I get. But the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me a sinner.”—LUKE xviii. 10-13 (R.V.).

RELIGION, no doubt, finds its true plane in personal piety ; but it is right and natural that Church forms should emerge, which are meant to express it, and foster its growth. These acquire a certain prescriptive authority in ordinary circumstances ; and unfortunately, with the unthinking, a false attitude towards them is insensibly developed, so that the forms often degenerate in practical value. Generations arise, different in character and outlook from their predecessors, and a peculiar note of unreality is apt to ensue in the religious world. The great mass of minds are ruled all too readily by convention and tradition ; and live

religion gets confused with conformity to some external system. Piety thereupon gets infected with a spirit of pretension; and people ostensibly full of sanctity may be found in daily life terribly lacking in the humble and tender qualities of Christian grace. This is to undermine the situation, it is cutting into the vital root of the matter; especially in the Gospel scheme where piety is a thing of the Spirit. It is the soul in a state of yearning, the mind wrought up into a heavenly frame; and it is best evidenced in pangs of penitence, and cries of faith and hope and love. That is the great lesson of this parable. What truly counts with God is the presence in us of a meek and lowly spirit, the spirit that loves and trusts, the spirit that is kind and sacrificing and unworldly. The difference in the story between the penitent Publican and the inflated Pharisee, is just the difference between religion and religiosity. Those who know and love the Master will never forget that one thing utterly abhorrent to his soul (as reflected in such a large proportion of the parables) was unreality. "Woe unto you, hypocrites."

Two men, at one of the stated hours of devotion, went up to the Temple to pray; each with the characteristics of his class well pronounced. The one, a Pharisee, was all for Moses: devoted, in a purblind way, to everything connected with that honoured

name; to the law and to the testimony, to the tradition of what was said, or said-to-be-said, by them of old time. He loved ritual, and ritual had him in its grip. Sabbaths and ceremonies were a tremendous punctilio; personal sanctification, in its finer shades at least, was secondary or forgotten. Righteousness was a thing of works, and regulated from the outside, rather than an inner holiness, free-born, and pervasive in spirit. A religion whose final fruits, on the broad view, could not be humility and loving-kindness, but petrified emotion, self-righteousness, and spiritual pride.

The other, the Publican, was secular in employment—not that the secular, in spite of all one hears to the contrary, is in the least degree negative to the exercise of religion. As collectors of taxes and of the customs, the Publicans were not popular; and as a class they were considered corrupt. It seems to have been the case that they could make false accusations, and exact more than was appointed them. They are described as mean-spirited; demoralised by their dishonest work, pampered with ill-gotten gain. Certainly in the Gospel narratives they are classed with harlots and the heathen.

In the orbit of our tale the two figures move in conjunction. We must note, therefore, that in the eyes of the Pharisees especially, the Publicans were

odious. The former, taken at their own valuation, were the salt of the earth, the most saintly samples of humanity in all Jewry, the chosen vessels of a chosen race. As they looked down, from the exalted standpoint of their own virtues, upon these poor tax-gatherers, oh, what a falling off was there! Miserable renegade Jews, hirelings of the accursed Roman, deserving only unlimited contempt. It is significant that when they wished to heap scorn upon Jesus, they exclaimed in pious horror that He ate and drank with such associates; they indulged the sanctimonious sneer, that He was the friend of Publicans and sinners.

Remembering, then, the relation between the two classes, in all the strength and colour of this contrast, let us draw near, and with the help of the Great Analyst, catch the distinctive accent of their voices. "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself." Yes, with himself; not much with his Maker. "God, I thank thee, that I am not as the rest of men." We feel at once in an atmosphere of the aloof; the man is far away in his heart from fellow-worshippers: "Stand back, I am holier than thou." Very prominent, no doubt, as regards stance; for his class loved the chief seats in the synagogues, and to pray standing in the market-place and at the corner of the streets, to be seen of men. And yet how hopefully his prayer opens: "God, I thank thee." Gratitude is one of the most

pleasing of virtues, though in rich form gratitude is rare. To begin thankfully is to begin well. But as the prayer proceeds, we discover that, instead of thanking God, he is congratulating himself; offensively complacent about a fancied goodness, sounding his own praises with a home-made trumpet, which he blows with all his might. "I am not as the rest of men." The world, for the moment, consists of two parts—himself, and the remainder of mankind. Others are great sinners, but he is the saintliest of saints. It is a prayer which doubtless became the prototype of that of "Holy Willie." Real thanksgiving, for any goodness he may have attained in life, should have been associated, not with vain-glory, but with humility.

Like a much more admirable Pharisee, St. Paul, who cried "By the grace of God, I am what I am," he should have given God the glory. But spiritual pride is suicidal; its poor triumph is like that of the valiant man, who killed an elephant in battle, but alas! got smothered by its corpse. This Pharisee puts everything down to his own credit, he gloats upon his much goodness. And worse remains; for he is not only on particularly good terms with himself, he is censorious toward others. He sets up, in genuinely pharisaic fashion, to be the wise judge of his neighbours, in respect of whom he is as uncharitable as he is falsely charitable to himself. In the language of the chron-

icler, he trusts in himself that he is righteous, and despises others. Hear how he glides on, purringly—he makes the airy declaration that he is not, like them, “extortioners, unjust, adulterers”—the worst things he can think of! Nor is this all. In the most invidious way, he compares himself with one of his fellow-worshippers. He sees the Publican at a distance, wrapt in contrite meditation; concludes at once that he is a great sinner, like others of his class, and straightway deems his own graces the more eminent; thanking God, or rather thanking himself, with thick unction, that he is not such as this vile tax-gatherer. How poor and steely-grey, however, in our eyes are seen to be the shine and glitter of his pinchbeck virtues, now that he has managed to work in as background the shady figure of a publican.

And when he has thus been brought back to the congenial task of thinking about himself, he goes on to glorify his perfections, and like the fabled frog swells onwards to destruction. “I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I get,” he cries in the superlative vein. The Law of Moses, as it happens, enjoined fasting only once in the year, on the great Day of Atonement. But the Pharisees, with their taste for supererogation, did it twice a week; this being one of the ritualistic additions in which their souls delighted. In all which, of course, there was not

necessarily any harm. They might stint themselves in food, in a free country, as often as they chose, and think they were doing a humane God service; but they were not at liberty to conclude, as this Pharisee concluded, that therefore they were better people than those who omitted such extra fasts.

And in regard to the other item in his boast, that he gave tithe on everything he gained, the Mosaic code simply enjoined payment of a tenth part of the fruits of the field, and a tenth of the increase of the cattle. But the Pharisees, with their fastidious attention to trifles, rigidly applied the command to the smallest of their garden produce—their mint, and rue, and all manner of herbs. In which, as before, there was not necessarily any harm. They might, in a free country, tithe their vegetables if they chose. Only they were not free to infer, as this Pharisee inferred, that therefore they were more righteous than their neighbours, whose gardens were unshorn by any such whimsical exactions.

Turn now to the portrait of the other worshipper, the despised Publican. The process spells relief; for infinitely simpler, and how unaffected, is his piety! The Publican thinks as much about his sins, as the Pharisee thought about his righteousness and the faults of other people. He begins at the beginning, for he is a humble man. He stood “afar off”; *i.e.* far from

the altar, not from God—that God who is nigh to those of contrite spirit. The Pharisee, probably, was near the altar; the would-be holy near the holy spot. But the Publican, with an overwhelming sense of his unworthiness, standing remote, “would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven”—to those skies which are emblem, in their purity, of the divine dwelling-place. The Pharisee would be quite confident in his gestures, lifting up hands and sanctimonious looks. But the Publican, conscious of past shortcomings, felt that, like the Prodigal, he had sinned against heaven, and was no more worthy to be called God’s son. He “smote his breast,” the reproaching movement of one angry with himself; as if to say, There, within, there in the heart of hearts, sin has been enshrined; my own heart condemns me, and God is greater than my heart. He is as much self-accused as his companion was self-praised. The confession, wrung from his agonised soul at the bar of conscience, is hardly articulate: “God be merciful to me a sinner.” That was all his prayer; simple, yet how sufficient. With the unerring instinct of an awakened soul, he goes straight to the heart of the matter of salvation; human weakness acknowledged, and the divine compassion implored—the wound laid bare for the Physician to heal. Here is the hunger and thirst after righteousness, which is blessed, because born of the right spirit, and certain to be filled. Not

that the subject is meant to be pursued further, at least in prosaic detail. The crisis of the story has been reached, and man's right attitude to God exemplified. The secret springs of real devotion are laid bare; personal piety revealed at the root. The Pharisee might be uttering a prayer, but he was not praying—the proper spirit of the situation he was elaborately missing. But the prayer of the Publican, while his soul was in the dust, ascended to the ear of Heaven. He went down to his house, justified rather than the other. It is the hungry God filleth with good things; the rich He sends empty away. Only faith of the simple spiritual kind can save—a faith that takes us in the right spirit to the right quarter, a faith that sets us in true relation to goodness, and ends in reconciliation with God.

“Blessed are the meek,” cried Jesus, as if giving text to stories such as this. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

XI

THE SERVANT PLOUGHING

“But who is there of you, having a servant plowing or keeping sheep, that will say unto him, when he is come in from the field, Come straightway and sit down to meat; and will not rather say unto him, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink? Doth he thank the servant because he did the things that were commanded? Even so ye also, when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do.”—LUKE xvii. 7-10 (R.V.).

THOSE who look into the glass of self-consciousness evidently see things out of proportion; being too near the object of their complacent gaze. They fancy they have attained to extraordinary virtue, and there is a pretentiousness about their piety which is offensive. We had a picture of this in the story of the Pharisee praying in the Temple; and it infected, we shall find, the attitude of the Labourers in the Vineyard, who grumbled at the owner's ideas of reward. Here also the subject is handled, in the parable of the Ploughing Servant, going on from one duty to another, and

suggesting to us the spirit we should show in such circumstances. Pharisaism in a deadly way tended to inflation, for it set people bargaining with God, and suggested reliance upon works of the law; the cure for which, in the eyes of Paul, who knew the system from the inside, was justifying faith. To Jesus, the evil was even more repugnant, not merely as a boasting over moral achievement, but as implying that God can become indebted to us mortals. This is why a bond-servant is selected for hero, *i.e.* one who owes all his labour to his master, from the very nature of the case. With us service goes by contract, formal or implied, but the ancient slave, like the household goods and chattels, was mechanically subject to ownership. He was at the master's beck and call, and could never, strictly speaking, say his work was done. As another passage puts it, the master of the house might come for him at even, or at midnight, or at cock-crowing, or in the morning. Pile on tasks as often and as long as possible, it could never be anything but true, technically, that each of them was the owner's due. That was the essential curse of slavery; for it meant an absence of obligation in the master; and as for thanks from him, these might be gracious and beautiful, but they could never be logical. Jesus seizes, then, on this social custom of the day, and applies it to the relation of the disciple to God. Nothing

should ever carry with it the feeling of being earned at God's expense. The suggestion of paradox, even of harshness, in the simile, gives it as usual all the more power to produce thought. We are not people hired to do this or that, and then to get our pay. Everything is of grace; for we are not possibly giving God more than is due to Him already. To feel the nearness of God, to have Him in us as our Life, and as the supreme good, that is our recompense in the unworldly sense. The idea of "business principles" in the high concerns of the soul, Jesus abhors. "Even so ye also," he says, "when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; ¹ we have done that which it was our duty to do."

"Who is there of you," asks Jesus, "having a servant plowing or keeping sheep, that will say unto him, when he is come in from the field, Come straightway and sit down to meat?" Not one of you. The poor slave himself would think the remark extraordinary, knowing well the work that is before him, ere the day be done. Tired probably he feels, holding the hard plough these many hours, or running after straying flocks and herds. Slouching along the road, "the toil-worn cotter from his labour goes"; but not

¹ The stress is on "servants," not on "unprofitable"; and the latter (*ἀχρεῖς*) is not to be pressed etymologically. The phrase was well-known, = POOR SLAVES!

for him as yet can it be said, his "moil is at an end." Without a break, he has to pass from the work of the fields to the duties of the household. The evening viands have to be arranged. With robe succinct, he has to wait upon his liege-lord, recumbent in comfort, dallying at the wine-cup. "Will not the master," Jesus puts it, "rather say unto his bondsman, Make ready wherewith I may sup, and gird thyself, and serve me, till I have eaten and drunken; and afterward thou shalt eat and drink?" Not that the owner is in the meantime getting under obligation to his underling; for the latter, just because he is a slave, renders a necessary service. "Doth he thank the servant because he did the things that were commanded?" Certainly not. The menial, good man, may have his own resource of comfort; for there is a religious sphere in which Jack is as good as his master. Inwardly, he may say with self-respect, "I don't need to be thanked for doing my duty; obedience is its own reward, done in the proper spirit." Not that the lesson, at this point in the tale, is on such lines. It is the routine of a Jewish home that is in emphasis. Task after task has to be taken up, and carried through; yet never so that the bondsman exacts recognition, or can claim merit in the master's eyes. Thus is it, by analogy, with God's servants in relation to their Divine Master. They are never possibly like

modern workmen, demanding extra pay for extra time. "Even so ye also, when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants (poor bondsmen); we have done that which it was our duty to do."

The moral is clear; we are to serve God in a certain right spirit. "Not in the way of eye-service, as men-pleasers; but as servants (bond-servants) of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart." Our faith in Him can be so single-minded, so whole-hearted, so truly alive, that it brings into our being the great power of God. We feel that God is giving us Himself, which is recompense enough, and more than enough. We are saved, therefore, from the pharisaic notion of haggling with God; with the vulgar thought in the background that we have been earning "wages" in the business, in which case our reward is there for us "on demand." Thus the fatal element of claiming credit comes in; whereas we owe so much to God—all we are, all we have, and all we may become—that the balance can never work out on our side. Neither on His part can duty be unwontedly exacted, nor can service on ours be gratuitously rendered. Two things are equally absurd—that God should be a debtor, and that we can put forth claims of merit. Rather we are as children with a Father, to whom reverence is daily due, and obedience His of right. The work which we

are called upon to do for His sake is work in which we should be absorbed ; the sacrifice free and full, the devotion whole-hearted and high. The humble, self-effacing spirit of the Gospel, therefore, and not a spirit touched to worldly calculation and self-righteousness, is the spirit for which, in the long-drawn round of earthly duty, we should be known. Everything is the gift of God ; not alone things in us and around us, but the very work that comes our way.

This warning was needed by the immediate followers of Jesus, who were inclined to be sanguine and even mercenary in expectation. They were to move with the Master up and down Palestine, sharing His trials, spreading His gospel : and then—a “then” which to their hopes was a “soon”—they should receive meritorious recognition, seated on thrones, and judging the twelve tribes of Israel. But alas ! they were thinking only of the day-duties of the servant in the story, who fed his flock and toiled behind the plough. At the close of day, when they hied them from the field, their Master and their Saviour would invite them to sit down to meat. The stern fact was, that in the evening also of their days, when shadows were lengthening on the path, they had to gird themselves for fatiguing duties. Forgetting the things that were behind, they had to press on to those that are before. Only when their course was finished could they sit down, and enjoy to

the full the heavenly manna, the divine wine—they drank it new with their Master in the Kingdom of God. “No longer do I call you servants; but I have called you friends.”

All this is informing to the workers of successive ages; for endeavour is still arduous, and requires a like spirit of humble endurance, and chastened sense of trust in God. Our career is like the climbing of a hill; we start with imperfect estimate of the difficulties of the project. The ascent, we find, is steeper; the road more uneven, the distance longer, and our breath scanted, than we calculated. As we toil and pant upwards, we thankfully descry at last the summit, and fondly imagine how we shall sit down contented there. Hope deferred no longer makes the heart sick. But when we reach the point, it is not the wished-for top at all! Another crest rises before us and above us, which we must endeavour to climb; and it is only after protracted labours that we do reach the goal, there to bask in the pure air of heaven, and have the eye satisfied with seeing the far-extending beauties of the promised land. So of the vicissitudes of human duty, as we press onwards, amid what seem often the mountains of vanity. We have our early ambitions, but we are long in reaching them. We feel faint betimes, and almost turn back, disheartened by unlooked-for difficulties. Gain the summit haply we may; but then

that other summit of which we spoke, where the mists cling, and to surmount which we must once more set ourselves with stout heart. To the faithless and the fatalistic, life comes to seem stern and hard, like the precipices we pass upon the hill-slope. We look for cessation from toil in the evening of life; but the relief vouchsafed is only this, that the work is somewhat different. Like the slave coming from the plough, we find the evening has its duties too; to use a modern simile, we are like parish nurses coming in from long rounds, only to find their ministrations wanted elsewhere. It is work, work, work; something more to be done for God, or what in the Gospel scheme is the same thing, something more to be done for man. "Grow not weary in well-doing" is the apostolic motto. Difficulties are simply the working-plan of Providence, under which the illusions of life make us sanguine for the time being. Gird yourself, like the slave, but in no slavish spirit, to face tribulation resolutely as it comes. It is wonderful what the right spirit can do—the spirit of brave and patient Hope, of quiet self-effacement for Humanity. The glory of the Gospel is not simply a revelation of the power of sacrifice, but an inspiring instance of it in the person of the Master Himself. How great were His triumphs before God, and yet how meek and lowly His heart. The arch-enemy of moral progress is pharisaic pride. Be not

satisfied with present attainments. Far short of the infinite glory must be our best services. Even in the presence of high achievements, true followers acknowledge: "We are like the poor bondsmen, we have done that which was our duty to do."

XII

THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a householder, which went out early in the morning to hire labourers into his vineyard. And when he had agreed with the labourers for a penny a day, he sent them into his vineyard. And he went out about the third hour, and saw others standing in the marketplace idle; and to them he said, Go ye also into the vineyard, and whatsoever is right I will give you. And they went their way. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out, and found others standing; and he saith unto them, Why stand ye here all the day idle? They say unto him, Because no man hath hired us. He saith unto them, Go ye also into the vineyard. And when even was come, the lord of the vineyard saith unto his steward, Call the labourers, and pay them their hire, beginning from the last unto the first. And when they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. And when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise received every man a penny. And when they received it, they murmured against the householder, saying, These last have spent but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us, which have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat. But he answered and said to one of them, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take up that which is thine, and go thy way; it is my will to give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? or is thine eye evil, because I am good?”—MATT. xx. 1-15 (R.V.).

THE Scots labourer of the olden time, a poor man in a poor country, when doing business with his fellows,

took quickly to the bargaining spirit, and could be keen as any Jew. But when it came to transactions with the Laird, his attitude altered. On the matter of monetary recognition being mooted, for some passing service, the instant and respectful answer was: "Your pleasure, sir." No doubt experience taught him that on the latter basis he came off better. In this new story of the Master, these are the two moods¹ we are to find illustrative; the arrangement with the labourers being in the one case, specifically, a penny a day; while in the other the vaguer rule was to run, "Whatsoever is right, I will give you." In the end, as it appears, the owner of the vineyard, for reasons of his own, gave to every labourer a penny; and in the situation that ensued, the moral comes out. Those who toiled longest showed a grudging feeling over the favour thus shown to those who had toiled less. Both parties "went their way" on terms stated—terms which were kept. But the one party went to work upon a bargain, made by them in the bargaining

¹ To those who think that, with only two categories in the interpretation, the succession of labourers seems unduly extended, it may be pointed out that at the oral stage of the tradition, this is the very kind of redundancy that might easily creep in. And when the Evangelist resolved to group his matter under the proverb, "Many that are first shall be last, etc.," the prolongation of the series was no objection, rather the reverse. This kind of criticism can be overdone, however, for it would cut out of the "Good Samaritan" the figure of the Levite, who is really helpful for emphasis.

way, whereas the other went on an agreement, which implied that the employer was a person they could trust to be just, or even generous. The parable, looked at in its simple breadth, reflects upon the pharisaic attitude of the professedly godly towards the penitent among the outcast and the poor. The most searching of the Gospel tests is the "manner of spirit" we are of; and the former class thought of God as one who watches us on a system of debtor-and-creditor accounts, while the latter, with truly justifying faith, looked to Him as signally a God of grace.

The picture as drawn, men say, can be paralleled by customs in the East, continued to our time. The labourers, spade in hand, are to be seen from day-break, standing in the market-place for hire. A householder comes along, mindful of the necessities of his vineyard in the course of the rolling year. Finding men willing to engage, he sends them to the work forthwith, the bargain being a penny a day—the silver penny of the Romans, about eight of ours, and seemingly the standard wage. At nine o'clock, going out again, he finds others idle in the market, and these he hires also by agreement—an agreement, however, on freer lines. "Whatsoever is right," they shall receive. At twelve and three, he does likewise; and going out yet again, "about the eleventh hour"—

one hour before work was suspended for the day—he finds a remnant, whom he not unkindly chides, “Why stand ye here all the day idle?” But excuses, if not reasons, rise ready to the lips of unemployed. The sluggard will not plough by reason of the cold (as if a fall in temperature affects that operation), and the slothful declares there is a lion without (“I shall be slain in the street”), as if uncanny creatures of that kind were met with in the village. Yet here the cry of the toiler sounds sadly sufficient: “No man hath hired us.” “Go ye also into the vineyard” was the quick rejoinder; the understanding being, as before, that they should receive what was right.

When even was come, the ground-steward paid their wage; for the law was merciful, and the hired servant could have his money on demand, “because he is poor, and setteth his heart upon it.” First came those of five in the afternoon, and they received every man a penny. Finally the first workers, and they likewise received every one a penny. Somewhat to the surprise, however, of the latter; for they “supposed they would receive more.” Why should the one-hour men be made equal to those who had borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat? Certainly, on the first blush of it, the grievance seems plausible. (Paradox again.) But a bargain is a bargain, and there was no

breach of faith. In the one case, the penny was the sum agreed upon; in the other, it was what the lord of the vineyard, in his lordly fashion, reckoned "that which is right." It is a story of the world, and the master of the situation is an easy-going sentimentalist, with whom fringes of money are neither here nor there. We can imagine him saying, as first cousin to the Good Samaritan: "Poor fellows, give them the penny; they've been idle long." Clearly in a court of justice, the complainers could have no case. But they were not magnanimous, and it is their narrow, grudging spirit that we are to note—their "evil eye," envying and grieving at their neighbour's good. The hinge of the tale, when we wish to open out the meaning, is this "murmuring." No doubt the make-weight of the matter was the householder's exercise of goodwill, an exercise in which to some he might seem arbitrary, quite sovereign in style. But strict dues had been thoroughly respected, and though justice ever must be sacred, it is yet the case that generosity knows no law. If the goodman went in for the principle of levelling up, there was nobody to say him nay. There was logic in his retort to the spokesman of the squad: "Friend, I do thee no wrong; didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take up that which is thine, and go thy way; it is my will to give unto this last, even as unto thee. Is it not lawful for me to do

what I will with mine own? Or is thine eye evil, because I am good?"

There was a certain wrong spirit, ending in the baneful temper of the Pharisee, rampant in the days of Jesus; and the rebuke to it here follows the lines of the closing moral of the Prodigal Son. There the father told the elder boy: "Son, thou art ever with me, and all that is mine is thine," entreating him to give up jealousy towards a less fortunate brother, long fallen on disgrace. These early labourers, similarly, had all day long been sure of their reward; why, then, grudge satisfaction at the eleventh hour to those less lucky, or who had dallied long? The real reason, however, why they could not bring themselves to the large-minded attitude was this, that they were steeped in the idea of reward, like the disciples prating of having forsaken all in the earthly sphere, and asking, What shall we have therefore? But a central notion in the parable is, that recompense is little of debt, and very much of grace. Those coming in at the eleventh hour, for instance, got eleven times more than they were entitled to, on the exacting rule of a penny for the twelve hours. They were latest illustration of the generous instincts of grace. The deepest note in the tale is certainly the kindness of the master, free to do what he willed with his own, just as it is the goodness of the father, in the story

of the Prodigal. It is the hardness of our thoughts about God, that is the evil; and if the first squad had been less full of the bargaining spirit in the market at cock-crow, doubting their Lord's bounty, so to speak, they would not have murmured so loudly at the vineyard gate at nightfall, when they saw that same bounty lavishly extended to other people. It may be difficult for the prosaic to perceive it, but poetic faith can yield better results (seeing a benevolent God is over all) than carrying the business mood into the concerns of the soul, and sticking to the letter of one's writs. As things stood, pitiful jealousy ("thine eye evil") became the ruling passion, instead of a rejoicing at kindness, which, while hurtful to none, was a blessing unto many. The goodness of the great God of Heaven is challenged by the hide-bound creatures of a day, who would be much better employed going past the idea of their "good works," to the fundamental thought, that for the whole power, and even the opportunity, of exhibiting these, they are dependent upon God. It was purely of favour that our Lord's hearers were in the vineyard at all.

One can understand how Paul, and followers of his, like Luther, in protest against the deadening works of the law, cried out for a free movement of the Spirit, and found it in justifying faith. They were

true to the principles of Jesus here. The old religion, with its abnormally developed ritual, had run to seed. Men in the thousand little turns of life were trying to obey a thousand godly regulations; and the system was bound to spell disaster even to the honest and eagerly devout. Life became a sort of ledger, with rubrics on every page, telling of a certain round of observances, felt to be exacting before God. The result was the debasing habit of calculating on reward. Things went down, debit and credit, in the account with God; with ever and anon the flattering unction laid easy to the soul, that the balance was on the right side. The soul might straightway sleep secure, it had such comfortable thoughts of brilliant records, lodged in the chancery of heaven. But what captious and uncharitable feelings towards others, what a foetid atmosphere of self-righteousness, was the awful result! People of that class, for all the ages, are sitting for their portrait in the parable.

A proverbial saying has come down to us in association with the story, investing it behind and before: "The last shall be first, and the first last" (xx. 16, cf. xix. 30). It would be a favourite motto with speakers at the weekly meetings of the faithful; and it means that those fondly expecting notable reward shall find their calculations confounded in the end. While worldliness develops, on the one hand,

and cannot for ever be disguised, God on the other is truly tender and loving to those who stand-in zealously to the work, however late in the day. The different kinds of spirit which the two classes show is to be put in parallel, for illumination, with the different feelings which they excite in onlookers. Simon, the infinitely self-satisfied one, repelled Jesus; whereas the woman who was a sinner, and who came with ointment to the feast, attracted him by her loving ways, and was deemed to be forgiven much. The former would have been own brother to the labourers, who bargained for their penny, and who got it ("they have their reward"); while the latter, most assuredly, would have trusted out-and-out the Master, to give her that which was right. Mere length of service is nothing in itself, for that is a visible sort of measurement; whereas the eternal judgment is unseen, and goes by motive and by spirit. The man with years of idleness laid to his charge may excel a steadfast neighbour, who all his days has rendered humdrum homage to the crusted conventions of some select communion. The returning prodigal took higher honours in a trice in God's kingdom than his immaculate brother, who was religious respectability incarnate. Judas, so very near to the person of the Master, and trusted with the bag, was far behind the obscure widow offering her two mites.

The dynamic is the Gospel spirit—the spirit of love and trust in goodness, the spirit that shone supreme in Jesus Himself. Men of humble hope, of patient and persevering prayer, will never find themselves classed in the lower grade of those who look to God for acknowledgment of their righteousness, after the manner of the Pharisee. Rather they are in line with the penitent Publican, considering their best is but poor, and that they are what they are, by reason of God's compassionate grace. They are getting more of the divine favour than they had any right to expect. Our temperature is taken on the spot, and the vital question ever is, How stands thine heart with God? Precious, then, is the assurance—a privilege open to all—that in the epistle of life new and happy chapters always can be opened. Solemn, very solemn, on the one hand must be the warning, that the First may be Last; but how encouraging, how merciful, how Christ-like, the companion declaration, that the Last may be First.

XIII

THE TWO SONS

“What think ye? A man had two sons; and he came to’ the first, and said, Son, go work to-day in the vineyard. And he answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented himself, and went. And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not. Whether of the twain did the will of his father? They say, The first.”—MATT. xxi. 28-31a (R.V.).

A VINEYARD we are bidden think of, on a fruitful hill; and two lads employed there with their father, about its sunny slopes. At his call, as the seasons came and went, it was their duty to turn up the soil, to dress the vines, to gather in the grapes, to tread the wine-press. And as it chanced upon a certain day, there was urgent necessity for labour; so he came to the first and said, “Son, go work to-day in the vineyard.” But strange and undutiful, there was rebellion, with rudeness in the curt reply, “I will not.” He was in the indolent mood, or bent upon a holiday. But a change came over the spirit of his dreams, and he relented. At the thought of his indulgent father wearing out his frame at the task, or at sight of him in the distance

amid the arching vines, conscience smote him—"afterward he repented himself, and went." This son, we are to notice, improves as he proceeds. At first surly and indifferent, he is now hearty, obedient, energetic.

With the other, the case was reversed. He agreed at once, when the father came to him, to go into the vineyard. Metaphorically he took off his coat. He announced that he was going to begin. Woe be to these weeds now, which are to wither before his flashing hoe! A black outlook for those shoots, which are to fall before his gardener's knife! But it is one thing to promise, another to perform. There may be prancing without progress; and rocking-horses can have the semblance of a gallop, yet never leave the spot. So of the second "hopeful" of the parent in the parable—he was a sham. "I go, sir," might come fair and softly from complacent lips; but what of the only sure test, the test of fact, "he went not." "Whether of the twain," asks Jesus, "did the will of his father?" "They say"—what else could they say—"the first."

If the story be taken as it stands, a moral well in accord with other teaching of the Master instantly emerges, namely, that the practical essence, and vital measure of religion, is the doing of the will of God. To obey is better than sacrifice; humble submission

to spiritual principle nobler, and more fruitful by far, than lip-service or multiplied observance of ritual. Indeed, we have a detached saying in the Sermon on the Mount which sums up the meaning at once: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. vii. 21). "Do not ye after their works," said Jesus of the scribes and Pharisees; "for they say, and do not" (Matt. xxiii. 3).

But the story has come down to us in a more specific connection, as bringing out the true piety of the unconventional and formerly abandoned classes of society, who, in contrast to the case of those hide-bound in the high places of the Church, had been listening in chastened spirit to the freshly stated teaching of John and Jesus. The Evangelist makes us think of the last sad days of the Master, when He was speaking in presence of bitter foes, bent on His destruction. The official religionists at Jerusalem, prating in jealous and exclusive mood about "authority," are about to crush this upstart prophet from the provinces. He is the doomed heretic shortly to be done to death. The croak of vultures is in the air; the wind from dark Gethsemane blows chill upon His cheek. But calmly He looks into their faces. The way of everlasting life, He tells them,

with incisive severity, is being trodden, not by the self-confident and seemingly religious, but by the lowly and despised, the penitent and once profligate ones.

“Verily I say unto you, that the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came unto you in the way of righteousness, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him” (vv. 31, 32). The Baptist, as “all hold” (ver. 26), was a prophet; advocating holiness, like yourselves, as the great end of the ancient revelation. He went in for fastings and purifying ritual, just as ye also are rigid in your rules and ceremonies towards righteousness. But what of the true inwardness of John’s doctrine, did you follow him in that? Nay. Where was the spiritual washing of penitence; the grace of those who, in *that* mood, go clinging to goodness, in faith and hope, and show it practically in sacrifices of the life, and brotherly feelings towards others, however outcast and poor? Instead of these things, you go on adhering to your hard system; scrupulous about the works of the law, and keeping aloof from “sinners,” as those who would defile you by association. You are like the second son in My story, wanting in true piety, in spite of all your seeming promise, with broadened phylacteries, and enlarged fringes, and loud-mouthed devotion to

“righteousness.”¹ Jesus shows us the rock on which the pharisaic system split.

See, on the other hand, how by the first son are typified the people of the land, and the quondam reckless livers in society, who with no pretension to piety—scoffing indeed, many of them, at one time, at the injunctions of God—are eager to enter on a new obedience. They were touched by the burning preacher of the Desert; contrite, as he required them to be; washed by the cleansing Spirit from their sins; doing the will of their Heavenly Father thereafter, and labouring zealously with Me, in the vineyard of the Lord. They have passed you Rabbis, cries Jesus, on the road! Ye, complacent in your legal righteousness, have missed the personal righteousness, the holiness which is of the heart and of faith. Nay, ye are aggravating the offence. In spite of all that you have lately seen—the power of revived religion in the lapsed masses—ye remained hardened, hide-bound

¹ “All the people,” says the third Evangelist, in his large literary way, “when they heard [the Baptist praised], and the publicans, justified God, being baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected for themselves the counsel of God, not having been baptized of him” (Luke vii. 29, 30). For those who shake the story loose from its traditional setting, there must seem to be something to be said for the idea that the parable of Matthew is just in rudimentary form the one in Luke xv.—the father with his two sons, the prodigal and the elder brother. Certainly the two Evangelists have the same figures in the background—the Pharisees and those whom they contemned.

in your notions. "Ye, when ye saw it, did not even repent yourselves afterward, that ye might believe him" (ver. 32).

One can rejoice specially in this parable because there seems to be in it, for all time, something peculiarly fetching, alike in its ideal and its appeal. To have all society saturated with the spirit of Christ; to have it enriched on Gospel principles; to have it cultivated for the growth and fruition of the noblest life possible: that would turn the comparatively waste places of the vineyard of our world into a veritable garden of God. And every one can come for work, however tardy the arrival betimes, as in the case of the first lad. No response is ever so faulty that it cannot be remedied in the spirit of patience. Is it not true to human nature, that we often see late-come labourers making their implements fly? What spending and being spent for humanity, what laying out of self in sacrifice, what taking up of the Master's cross, do not the angels behold, when new bursts of enthusiasm for the Kingdom come?

Mark with what a gracious word ("Son") the invitation opens, to this vineyard on the pleasant hill. It is to no enforced toil, as if we were slaves under a stern taskmaster, who flourishes about our ears the fear of hell, as his whip. No, it is to a free, a cheerful, a loving obedience under

a Father, who has called us in His kindness to be the sons of God.

And note the phrase ("Go, work ") which tells the glad duties of the sonship. It is not, "Go, talk about religion"; or "Go, show yourselves to the priests." It is not even, "Go, sit down at the Table of the Lord." These things are not religion itself; only aids to its expression and diffusion. The test is more searching for sincerity; the test of work in the practical sphere, which Jesus exalted. Were it mere emotion, that might evaporate in a speech. Were it only intellectual play, the voluble endorsement of some old-world creed, that might never come down to daily beneficence at all. No, give us deeds. Let us know you, as that husbandman knew his vines, by your fruits—by the flavour of your vintage, the fine aroma of your Christian spirit. It is in the clash of life that the aroma—the tone and temper—will appear; crushed into the air in which you live and move and have your new being.

And it is work, notice, not for self, but for God in man. The call is to duties within "the vineyard" walls. It is not, Seek thine own comfort, thine own riches, thine own pleasure; but, Labour for Humanity—the advance of My reign of love and goodness among men. Lose your life—or at least seem to lose it, for you'll find it. Seek the happiness of others;

and oh, blessed paradox, you'll find the highest happiness yourself.

One last little word must not escape us, "to-day." Flowerets are sometimes unnoticed, on the casual view. It is not, Go, work to-morrow; or next "term"; or, when we "re-open" premises with the new season's show. Ah, no; the call is pressing, it is immediate. "To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts." "Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation." "The night cometh, when no man can work."

XIV

THE LOST SHEEP

“How think ye? if any man have a hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and go unto the mountains, and seek that which goeth astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth over it more than over the ninety and nine which have not gone astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.”—MATT. xviii. 12-14 (R.V.).

JESUS, from early up-bringing in Galilee, knew well the lowly of the land; and it is the devout among these whom He describes as “little ones which believe on me” (ver. 6). Their feelings towards Him we readily imagine: feelings exceedingly warm, and seen to be such, against the cold background of the pharisaic-minded section, who sat enthroned in the high places of the religious world. The attitude of these last towards them was lofty and unsympathetic. Indeed, the contrast between Jesus and His opponents nowhere appears more vividly than in this question of right relation to the lower strata of society. To Jesus, with His ever-pressing thought of the loving fatherhood of

God, these converts seemed "children" of grace: all the more welcome to return to home-fellowship with the Divine, because hitherto they had seemed self-willed, uninstructed, and indifferent. "See that ye despise not," He cries, "one of these little ones" (ver. 10).

If in the earthly sphere not even a sparrow falls to the ground without the divine permission, much less in the higher scale can the humblest human soul be seen, with unconcern, to be going astray. It is only those unloving in disposition who can calmly act as if such were hopelessly abandoned; those of true feeling in the matter, which is a genuine feeling of anxiety, will evince unmistakable joy when any lost one is recovered. This is the moral which Jesus attaches to his new tale: "It is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish." Somehow the Pharisees and scribes, worthy men in their own way, were never able to throw aside caste-feeling. The more refined among them might admit a theoretical interest in the unreclaimed; but the crasser section would wonder at so much concern being exhibited about disgraceful persons. All would reserve the right, consciously or unconsciously, to adopt a distant attitude socially, and there would be a certain tone about their words and deeds which suggested spiritual pride. Tested at any rate by practical issues,

and in particular by the absence of a missionary spirit, these complacent critics were as those who looked down upon the poor and lowly, and still more upon the degraded and abandoned. Such people, in their eyes, were a negligible class; a fact which argued the wrong outlook on their part. And it showed a bad spirit also, of which we have a glimpse in a phrase that has come down to us in another connection: "Certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and set all others at nought" (Luke xviii. 9).

Jesus takes His hearers to the mighty realm of God's compassion; that God who is the Father of all men, and the enemy of none. Not even the most hopeless sinner, He tells, is left to the cruel mercies of men, but rather is individualised as an object of solicitude, the seeking for him being incessant, and the joy unbounded at his recovery. The more wayward the poor sinner, the more longing is the love of God towards him. Any attitude on our part, therefore, less merciful than that were unworthy—nay, a reflection upon the course of providence. Moreover, it is untrue to our own experience of life, contrary to our higher feelings. For men delight more in that which is lost and recovered, than in that which has never gone amissing. A thousand instances from earthly matters attest this. What man of you, for instance, having a hundred sheep, if one of them be gone astray, doth not leave the

ninety and nine, and go unto the mountains, and seek that which goeth astray, until he find it? Would not every one of you, in that event, do exactly what pitying servants of God do, as regards the lost ones of society, whose need and misery are greater in comparison? Assuredly. Like a trusty and a skilful shepherd, you would leave at once the body of the flock to browse on the grassy plateau, and bend all your energies to the search for that one, which has now a larger place in your thoughts than all the others put together. You would follow upwards the windings of the stream, and examine the patches of verdure by its brink, where the truant may have loved to linger. The lonely dells you would explore, where it might be found caught in a thicket. Or you would make for the mountain pass, the gorge of death-like shadows, where you descry it at last, fixed helpless on the rocks. Bit by bit, it has nibbled its way up the rough ascent, until, like many a thoughtless sinner, it is compromised upon the giddy precipice. To see it wasted with hunger, in the not uncommon predicament supposed, would bring a rush of feeling to your heart. You would stoop over it in pity, lift it with a strong arm, and lay it gently on your shoulder. At first it was the sense of loss that was overwhelming, and as you searched and better searched, the feeling gained upon you. But how happy the recoil now, as you trudge homeward with rejoicing

heart. The distance seems shortened, and as nothing. Your neighbours in the little hamlet beneath the shadow of the hill, acquaint with like experience, and knowing how earthly fortune for them centres in possession of the sheep, gather in kindly welcome as you are seen returning. And when you hear the pleasant hum of their congratulations, and see your joy reflected in the countenance of friend after friend, the flood-gates of your heart are opened, and you are ready to cry out, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost" (Luke xv. 6).

Very gracious, in this light, are seen to be those methods of an overruling providence, which the pharisaic essay to read with eyes which do not see. The love of God pursues everywhere the evil of this world, and turns it in wondrous fashion into good. What a picture here of the Eternal Righteousness leaving, as it were, the mighty movements of the heavenly bodies for the moment, and going off in search of one poor sinner! In ways of which we wit not, we are beset behind and before by His infinite love—a love greater than that of earthly parent for her child; a love much pained by the foolishness of men; a love which yet bears patiently with our backslidings, and while reproving us firmly for wandering, constrains us gently to His will; a love destined in the age to come to cast its spell over humanity at large.

The time comes to every man when he is conscious of shortcoming, and finds that, like the fleecy wanderer, he is helpless and in piteous plight. But, oh, the mercy of our God to those who in His eyes are much better than a sheep! His compassion broods over us in the low and lost estate. He sanctifies us in our trials, so that saving in His hands becomes the discipline of life, when at last we have the eyes to see, when at last His Spirit makes us feel, that God has been with us all our life long, and that even when we held Him at a distance His arms have been outstretched to save. His Spirit has but striven with us the more, and now we must needs own He has proved the Shepherd, in truth, of our souls: the great and the good Shepherd, working by many messengers sent after wandering ones, but seen most clearly in Jesus Himself, who led a life of hardship like a mountain-shepherd, who trod the path of suffering, that He might speed the errand of mercy; whose eye fell in pity upon the poor and lowly, the unfortunate and the despised; and who rebuked the unfeeling attitude of lofty critics with teaching so precious as this.

Jesus had come, He said, to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; and who that looks back on His career to-day can fail to acknowledge that, like the shepherd figured in the story, He was full of persevering earnestness, going after that which was lost until He found it?

He wearied not of the greatness of the way ; He was daunted by no difficulties ; pressing ever onwards upon the thorny track ; bearing alike meekly the faithlessness of friends, the scorn and cruelty of foes. Even as a shepherd seeketh out his sheep, so did He gather the faint and erring ones together, bending over them in mercy, penning them in the fold for immortality, where they can go in and out and find pasture, and linger at the refreshing fountain of grace, formerly despised. And so do sharers of His Spirit ever since, laying out life lovingly in sacrifice, and ceasing not till every wanderer they know is reclaimed, given strength for the future, and seen of all men to be no longer far from righteousness and the one Father's fold.

Obviously, scenes like these are suffused with gladness. "He rejoiceth over that sheep more than over the ninety and nine which have not gone astray" (ver. 13). In the elaborated version of St. Luke, the returning shepherd (as we saw) exults with neighbour and with friend, assembled in celebrating mood. Just because of the doubts and difficulties and sacrifices of the search, is the rejoicing richer and deeper, when the sense of loss is relieved, and pity has had its pangs assuaged. The ninety and nine who went not astray, those at ease within the landmarks of the covenant, the just persons who need (or fancy that they need) no repentance, excite no such ebullient emotion. The

legalist is only relatively just; not a flagrant offender, it is true, yet only correct on an external system. "I came not to call the righteous," said Jesus, "but sinners" (Matt. ix. 13). The pharisaic as such are for ever forbidding. How could second-class righteousness of their sort excite the highest kind of joy before the throne of God? The very publicans and harlots, caught on the lingering green spot in their nature, passed before them into the great Kingdom.

A solemn warning, surely, for all time, to those affecting the hard-hearted and well-nigh hopeless manner of religion, which battens upon formal rules, and stumbles over jots and tittles of the law. A trying to live up to what, at the best, is but a shadow of the perfect righteousness: something which trains its followers away from the freely generous and socially sacrificing habit; not the righteousness which is of faith, the faith working by love. That is how churchly institutions can sometimes be practically sterile. With beliefs decreed by authority, to meek disciples, who pass muster politely at the gateway of tradition; with ritual elaborate and exacting, at once fashionable and final; with morality conventional, and with peccadilloes nicely balanced by services performed, and offerings accepted, at the hallowed shrine. Where is the joy springing in such lives from sheer interest in the unfortunate and the lowly? Where is the heart of melt-

ing pity for the fallen; where the lively faith in the eternal mercy of our God, towards the humblest creature He hath made? Where does the play come in, of the distinctive enthusiasm of the Gospel—an overmastering passion for the sway of goodness in humanity, as being the Kingdom which the Master taught, and which He desired us day by day to advance? The doom is written: “If any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his” (Rom. viii. 9).

Oh, then, to be like Jesus, as figured in such stories, tender, pitying, patient towards others: sorrowing over every wanderer we know, till he return; joying, like the angels of God, in the triumphs of good over ill; braving earth’s fieriest trial, after the ideal of Him, who gave him, body, soul, and spirit, for the flock. Or, if we cannot hope to be as the Shepherd, then (as said the negro-missionary) to be the Shepherd’s dog: the humble, faithful servant, following at the master’s footstep, ready at the master’s call, and with an eye watching his every movement and desire: eager to run off, eager even to panting, to pursue those lost souls, which like sheep have gone astray, and turned every one to his own way. Oh, to bring them back in safety, down the steep of difficulty, through the lone vale of trial, past the prowling adversary, the wild beast of passion; guiding, guarding, praying; growing not

weary in well-doing, and attaining highest satisfaction only when the wanderer is home to the Good Shepherd's care, safe at last within the fold.

Such, to the Christian, is the joy of joys. A service which is perfect freedom, and to the willing heart a certain source of happiness and peace. It is the hope of man; a work whereto God in Christ hath set His seal; a work which cannot fail; a work in which all may engage, to their soul's welfare in the day of Christ. Every one can labour for the realising of the world to come; the glory of God upon our earth which by vision of faith we can see, like the Seer of Patmos, from afar: "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun strike upon them, nor any heat: for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them unto fountains of waters of life: and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rev. vii. 16).

XV

THE LOST COIN

“What woman having ten pieces of silver, if she lose one piece, doth not light a lamp, and sweep the house, and seek diligently until she find it? And when she hath found it, she calleth together her friends and neighbours, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the piece which I had lost. Even so, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.”—LUKE xv. 8-10 (R.V.).

It is wonderful the power of “line,” and here we have a figure drawn with very few strokes, a heroine in homespun. Vividly there starts up to the mind’s eye a frugal woman, absorbed in the routine of her household cares: one to whom money is valuable, for the time-honoured reason that it is somewhat scarce. Like the humble widow in the garret of a modern town, she has been left by fortune—or the want of it—to fight a hard battle for existence. Ten pieces of silver—in our currency a paltry six-and-sixpence—represent her hard-won savings, laid up against a rainy day. Or rather there were ten; for somehow, when she comes to count them, one has disappeared, and

must have dropped aside. Whereupon dismay is written on her countenance, self-debate is busily at work within her brain. Although only a "penny" to the better off, the loss is great to her, in view of the particular claims certain to be made upon her shrunken store. Search must instantly be entered upon. So she takes a lamp; for the houses of the Jews were dark, glass was rare and windows small; daylight struggled through a doorway, half open in the Eastern sun. The floor, of earth, was littered thick with rushes, and must be sifted as a likely lurking-place. So she gets a-sweeping, and what a dust she raises, what a tumbling of the household articles about. The search is pictured as nothing if not thorough; no nook into which the coin may have rolled escapes her peering scrutiny and all-commanding broom. She shall "seek diligently"—whole-souled resolution is the idea—till the truant is discovered. And perseverance is rewarded; for suddenly, from out some grimy corner, she sees the missing silver, shining amid a heap of sweepings. What a light that was to her straining eyes! We think we see her bustling figure dimly through the cloud of dust: now amply energetic, anon darting downwards, the instant she "hath found it." Exclamation, no doubt, followed; and the beam of satisfaction on her face is broad, as she appears at the door, hurrying out in female fashion to tell the

village neighbours of her news. Readily they gather round her, and listen to the elaborated tale. They willingly accord that echo of congratulation which her looks and gestures are seen at the proud moment to expect. "Rejoice with me," she cries in ecstasy—genuine joy paying no heed to strict measures of proportion—"for I have *found* the piece which I had lost!"

What genius, and more than literary genius, in the choice of illustration! To take up an image so unconventional, and from the richly human, yet unconsidered sphere, to draw the divine moral—"Even so, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (ver. 10).

Clearly the aim of the parable, like that of the one which precedes, is to make a spiritual application of the homely truth, that the greatest joy is over things lost and recovered. There were those in Palestine, as there are these now, who were negligent in interest, not to say aloof in attitude, as regards the poor and lowly, the abandoned and degraded. The highest possible happiness, could they but have seen it, falls to people who concern themselves with the reclamation of such. If you lose a coin, argues Jesus, instantly and eagerly you search for it, as being something precious. Universal experience confirms that there is peculiar

pleasure when seeking is rewarded with success. So of God, who prizes every soul of man, and misses at once the individual who lapses from His treasury. Therefore it is, and in the divine name, that ministering servants of His seek anxiously the fallen; they labour and they long to lay their hands in joy upon these lost ones, at present so degraded amid the dust of time and of sense.

In the case of the shepherd, it will be remembered, although the feeling of loss was prominent, there came in the emotion of pity for the sinner's plight—the silly, straying sheep, reduced by its own waywardness to most melancholy case. Here the ruling passion is appreciation of value—a precious and immortal soul is at stake. That soul is missed by God, and is as valuable to Him, as were the pennies to the woman in the earthly tale. In providence, therefore, every endeavour is made for the salvation of less favoured ones; and only the Church of Christ can truly know the long labours which that crusade has implied. What life-passion of devoted souls, modelled on the Master's; what never-ending sacrifice, what contendings on the page of history, this diligence in seeking has called forth. Not without dust too, to moralise in passing; almost blinding the believer at times, making him sad of heart, as he strains his gaze to follow the half-hidden workings of God. What clouds of controversy, what

upturnings of the staid habits, the placid conventionalities of the world. What seeming disorders of a gospel, bringing not peace, but a sword.

And yet how glorious is the consummation of all these anxious toils. The acme of the story, we must not forget, is the happiness that issues in contrast at the close. Think of the results of the redeeming efforts of workers in the name of Jesus, in dark places of the world, where light, as in the woman's dwelling, is represented by most feeble gleams. Going with the candle of the Lord among the lowest of the low; what sorry coins in seeming now, what poor reflections of the image of their Maker; coated over thick with sin-dust, with unspeakable defilements of the world, the flesh, and the devil. But what a mission of mercy to pick up with loving hands any such much-marred soul: to wash away its stains, to burnish it to brightness, and give it back to God, filling up the blank that has been there and has been offending the All-seeing Eye.

Absence has made the heart grow fonder, and during all the search the Father has been yearning for the lost. Joy, therefore, is unbounded at the close. It is like a torrent bursting from a pent-up source, and it overflows like that of the woman with her neighbours and her friends. The Church is like the human body, whose members share alike in the emotions that pass

through it; so that when one has occasion to rejoice, the others rejoice with it. The hearts of the faithful are knit together, as by a containing band of sympathy. It is in accord with the law of gravity, and mathematically true, that our mighty globe moves to meet the falling of a marble or of a pin-head, though eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, the movement thereof. So of the great heart of Christendom, though it be unconscious, like the beating of our own hearts, it throbs in harmony over every latest triumph of salvation. The spirits of just men made perfect, the aspiring souls of the militant on earth, thrill in unison. God Himself has no holier satisfaction than the advancement of His Kingdom—to see the sons of men, even one poor outcast, received back in penitence, and made partakers of a glory like His own. “I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (ver. 10).

The story is singularly impressive. To think of the great God of heaven and earth having a sense of loss regarding the most obscure offender. The world makes little of its units; one man, they say, is never missed. What is a single, frail, and evanescent creature among the millions and billions of the globe, the endless succession of sentient beings through the ages? But how different the Christian view! The individual,

endowed with intellect and emotion, with conscience and with will, has a nature fitted for high ends. He is intended to fulfil God's purpose of love, to share in His glory, to enjoy Him for ever. What a loss, therefore, alike to his Maker and to himself, that he should fall away from this lofty calling. And specially a loss in the economy of the universe, because there has been work assigned him to do: specific work, which lies more to his hand than it does to any other's. Such deficiency is glaring to an Omniscient Being; the loss must be a felt loss. God is virtually pictured in the parable as perceiving the blank at once, whether it be in the near or the far perspective of His colossal realm.

The best illustration comes when we think of Jesus Himself as the seeker and finder; the worker in intimate communion with the Father, the well-beloved Son. These publicans, thronging to His audience, of what account were they in the eyes of men? Disreputable from their office; socially abhorred; hopelessly severed, it was thought, from the great hope of Israel. And the "sinners" of whom we read, who were they? Profligates. Outlawed by the life they led; equally insignificant with the others, according to the canons of the time. Pharisaism met them with a scowl. It disdainfully gathered in the skirts of its proud piety, as they passed, and turned complacently to heaven

relentless pairs of supercilious eyes. What a sin, it said, in Jesus to have them in His company! Ah, but this was the glory of His Gospel, that He saw in such the image of the Father; blurred, but capable of being cleared of evil, brightened to the beauty of holiness, handed back to their Owner in the heavens. Yes, this is the real revelation of the Christian, that God cares even for the low, that He has a sense of loss regarding them, and that He is actually disconsolate till He recovers the chief of sinners. The highest moral effort of intelligence is Pity; and when do we more reverence the mind that was in Jesus, than when we see Him thus filled with compassion—seeking out the degraded in their obscurity, and sorrowing until they are restored? If we can imagine a text upon the tomb of the Master, it would be this: “The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.”

Another thought, suggested by the circle of ideas in which the story moves, is this, that not only does the great search spring from sense of loss, and end in extraordinary joy, but it is thorough like the woman's, and persevering in its course. How manifold, in modern days, are the visible ministrations of the Church, how ceaseless the unseen strivings of the Spirit. Thousand-voiced is the call of conscience and of duty; multitudes of higher feelings address themselves in

entreaty to our hearts. Countless are the influences, including even our crosses, that constrain us to the way that we should go. How abounding, above all, the personal sacrifices of the true followers of Jesus, seeking for living souls, prone among the dead things of the world. Low indeed we lay : sin-soiled, degraded in spiritual darkness ; when lo, a radiance from on high shines round about us ; we are sought out in name of the Son, who holds out to us, like a lamp, the perfections of that Life which is the Light of men ; and oh, wondrous condescension, He stoops over us in mercy, He lifts us, as something precious from the clay, He renews our poor dim image, He restores us to the riches of His grace, He takes us to Himself, a treasure in the heavens.

Here is a lesson for all time—the dearest joy in life is joy in the beholding of triumphant goodness. Those who know the power themselves of the happiness bound up with holiness, must fain see the same descending upon their fellows. The worldling thinks he can be happy of himself, and in himself ; but the distinctive Christian principle is sacrifice, the Cross our emblem o'er the globe. Giving is greater than receiving ; for the psychological reason, if for no other, that it is so beneficial in its action, and reaction, on the soul. Let this, then, be our joy : to be interested in others, and to lay ourselves out on their behalf ; and bring

them to the keeping of God, to the happiness and holiness and peace of His spiritual rule. The Master's whole life and teaching are inspiration and example on the theme. "Fulfil ye my joy," was the pleading of His greatest follower, the Apostle Paul. And what saith the old Prophet? "They that turn many to righteousness shall shine as the brightness of the firmament"—shine as do the stars, for ever and ever.

XVI

THE PRODIGAL SON

“A certain man had two sons : and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of thy substance that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country ; and there he wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that country ; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country ; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have been filled with the husks that the swine did eat : and no man gave unto him. But when he came to himself he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish here with hunger ! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight : I am no more worthy to be called thy son : make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But while he was yet afar off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight : I am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth quickly the best robe, and put it on him ; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet : and bring the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat, and make merry : for this my son was dead, and is alive again ; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field : and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called to him one of the servants, and inquired what these things might be. And he said unto him, Thy brother is come ;

and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. But he was angry, and would not go in: and his father came out, and intreated him. But he answered and said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, and I never transgressed a commandment of thine: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but when this thy son came, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou killedst for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that is mine is thine. But it was meet to make merry and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found."—LUKE xv. 11-32 (R.V.).

No reader of the Gospels in the Gospel spirit can fail to prize the fifteenth chapter of St. Luke. It is the heart of the whole matter; such a revelation of the long patience of Pity, the happy triumphs of Divine Love. And of the precious parables which it contains, the last is matchless, dwarfing even the two beautiful companions at its side. The purpose of the three is alike: to vindicate the ways of God with sinners, and to show that the acme of rejoicing is over that which was lost but is now recovered. High intelligence, however, we never associate with sheep, and pieces of silver do not exhibit feeling; so that in the final story, where we have a fellow-mortal responsive in soul with penitence and faith, the deepest interest of all emerges. Moreover, the relation of a father to a son is more intimate than that of a flockmaster with his flock, or of a woman with her closely kept coin. Add yet this above all, the finished beauty of the literary details, and the magnificent sense of triumph in the

teaching at the close, where the gloomy figures of the pharisaic critics stand baffled in the background. By tokens like these, we realise that in the parable of the Prodigal we have the most divinely tender and most humanly touching story ever told upon our earth.

Home has its wholesome restraints. Less effective, it may be, with younger than with elder sons; certainly less rigid where the father is the soul of kindness and consideration. But whatever the restraints, self-willed youths will chafe; and in this we are to see the folly of the younger son, claiming and receiving by anticipation his share of the paternal goods. Not without admirable ambitions of a kind, we may suppose, this dissatisfied boy; yet one in whose frame the pulse of passion had begun to beat. He wants to push his fortune in the world; a world with attractions which he longs for liberty to cultivate, a sphere of pleasure which the money now obtained will enable him to enjoy. So he becomes his own master, and with all the ardour and ignorance of youth strikes out into the path of worldliness and self-indulgence. Liberty becomes licence, and he spends his portion madly. Not many days after, he "gathered all together"—what an irony in that word "gather," for it was a gathering to end in scattering—and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance

with riotous living. Something more, evidently, than imprudence and reckless squandering of his goods, although he might begin with methods of making merry which society approved. The suggestion is clear, that he became the immoral votary of pleasure; he was a drunkard or a debauchee, or both. He wasted his means, his brain, his body, his talents, and his time—earned, in short, the name by which we are to know him, the Prodigal or graceless spendthrift.

And now behold the misery to which he is reduced, or rather, has reduced himself. Ruin is the end of riot. Sure as darkness follows day, the time comes when shallow pleasures cease to please; nay more, when they give place to pain. Nature recoils from satiety of vice; enervation and remorse unerringly assert their sway. And this fate, as Nemesis from heaven, befell the younger son. He had given a loose rein to passion, and now that wild courser has thrown him to the ditch. The bloom is gone from his blasted life, and there is a weary sickness in his soul. He is reaping inevitably the bitter fruits of folly in that “far” land—far indeed from home and heaven, from parent and purity and peace. While to accentuate his misery—for we are visited in providence by outward troubles as well as inward shames—he finds himself frowned upon by stern circumstance; for “there arose a mighty famine in that land, and he began to

be in want." The wolf, and a very hungry wolf, was at his door, when he had spent all. Thus bankrupt in fortune and character, emptied alike of position and of purse, he is compelled by Necessity, that grim taskmaster of fools, to stoop to a menial occupation, although ill-fitted for rough work, like so many of his class. This, remember, is an old, old story; a tale told, and to be told, of thousands of lives. He went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. What about his liberty now? Turned, because abused, to basest bondage. Lower and lower in the social scale he sinks, after the certain manner of his kind. What a force in that single word "sent"! No master of his own movements, but ordered to the field like a slave; ay, and the slave of one who was a Gentile, an alien in that far land, which of itself would be gall and wormwood to the Jewish boy. And then his occupation—dealing with unclean animals: an employment vile in every one's eyes, but odious especially to Jews, the very last task they would turn to! The earnings of the wretched office were evidently a pittance, not enough to appease the pangs of hunger. "He would fain have been filled with the husks that the swine did eat; and no man gave unto him." What a picture of abject misery! Lying emaciated beside the swine; filthy husks for fattened calves; gay clothing

turned to mean and bespattered apparel; high-bred education mated with the gruntings of the insensate herd. And oh, so weak and trembling; so lonely in his low and lost estate. For his friends were false like his own life; mere boon companions, who left him when his riches left him. They buzzed about him, like the bees in sunshine, but disappeared when the crash came. Not one of them, mindful of the mirthful orgies to which he had so often led them, gave aught unto him. He had less than falls to a wayside beggar on the score of pity; and to meet the terrible gnawings of starvation, the only thing within his reach was the coarse and unpalatable wild-bean ("husks"), which, if eaten by human beings, was used only by the poorest of the poor. He was sunk, as it were, to the level of the brutes which perish, lower almost than the swine.

But behold, in Mercy, a change for good: the deepest depth of wretchedness fathomed, the remotest point in the wanderings reached. "When he came to himself"—and how expressive the phrase, as if he had been beside himself hitherto—his thoughts reverted to the past with its plenty and its peace. He remembered wistfully, did this broken man, the by-gone days when home was home, and hopes were high, and innocence unblemished—a happiness heightened in imagination by contrast with his present bitter

need. The forgotten faces flashed back upon him from the old and kindly regulated dwelling, where even to be a servant was to be privileged indeed. How much better the humblest position there, than the slave of an alien here. "How many hired servants," he cried, "of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I"—the son who inherited the son's portion—"perish here with hunger!" There was desperation in the heart-wringing memory. But the night is darkest before the dawn; and suddenly the light shines. Could he not throw himself upon the mercy of his father? "I will arise," he said; for the hope in its eagerness soon passed into resolve. He had been seated, full of disconsolate broodings, among the squalid herd, and suddenly starts up with new life in him, as he exclaims: "I will arise, and go to my father." Yet he could hardly hope for perfect restoration. Evil doers are evil dreaders. Still he could implore forgiveness, and beg to be received in pity beneath the old roof-tree. "Father," he should cry, "I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight; I am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants." Thus humbled, thus hoping, thus penitent, thus praying, he arose and went.

And now the fourth act in the unfolding of the drama, the wanderer's return. From the scenes of sin

and misery, he hurries him: still dubious in expectation, and conscience-stricken at the thought of the cold reception he may meet with at the well-known door. Yet in reality, as we shall see, he had been unharshly thought of all these years; unforgotten by one whom he had grievously dishonoured. That father with a father's heart mourned perpetually the absence of his erring boy. A thickening cloud hung o'er his dwelling, and he was haunted by the spectre of the outcast's shame. It threatened to bring down his grey hairs in sorrow to the grave. Often and often he looked adown the road, if haply he might espy returning the long-lost son. And there at last, if only his ageing eyes can be believed—there, at the bend of the highway, where travellers emerge upon the view, there no doubt is the forlorn figure of the prodigal. Can tattered rags, and wasted frame, and stooping gait, disguise him from recognition; he who, on that same road, departed with sprightly step, and ruddy glow of health, and wild wavings of farewell? No, the father knew him on the instant ("while he was yet afar off"), and at once the yearning heart was in a ferment of compassion. He cannot wait for him to come; he must fly to meet him, and take him in his arms. The whole black past, in a moment, is rolled away for ever, because the light of his life has returned. All is forgiven and forgotten in the glad welcome and

embrace—he ran, we are told, and fell on his neck and passionately kissed him.

But if the father was overcome, the son was overwhelmed. At least his intended declaration is upset by these rapturous tokens of affection. He makes contrite confession of unworthiness, but there is no mention of the hired servant. The atmosphere in which he found himself was fatal to the idea of that. The gladness of the forgiving father, it is to be noted, is emphasised of set purpose; and it circles round the prodigal, not simply as a son, but as one lost and now recovered. The joy in the whole abnormal circumstances is so intense that it is at a loss for abundance of expression. “Bring forth,” he cries, as the two approached the homestead, “the best robe, and put it on him.” Where is the signet-ring? He is barefooted like a beggared slave; make speed to busk him with the sandals of the free man. Kill the calf which we had stalled against the next festival. One and all, I give up the household to holiday. The father, clearly, was beside himself with joy; and rejoicing is never more hearty than over one who has been long away. “Let us eat, and make merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.”

But lo, to make a fifth and final section of the story, a grievous note of discord is suddenly sounded. The elder son was in the field: at work evidently, for

he speaks of how he served his father, and when he came from it at meal-time ("drew nigh to the house") the sound of music and dancing broke upon his startled ear. Instantly he asked a passing servant what the racket meant; and when the answer came, he broke out in anger. A person, evidently, of ungenial soul. This fellow, he thinks, has disgraced the family, and the less the household hear of him and his performances the better! Here was reason and occasion, not for festivities, but for discipline and righteous judgment. The elder son would have had his brother lectured in private. So saying, or so thinking, he turned on his heel in a rage: vowing sullenly that "he would not go in." Himself surely the prodigal now, because failing in natural affection, wanting in the warm and gracious feelings of the child of God. But see, once more, the wondrous forbearance of the father, as he went out and entreated him. Patiently he listens to a long complaint. "These many years," the churl had cried, "do I serve thee" ploddingly and well—"never transgressing a commandment of thine"—yet, far from receiving tokens of appreciation like the fatted calf, I got not even a paltry kid, wherewith to make merry with my friends. All uttered with the most injured air, so complacent always is your hide-bound moralist. There is no recognition of the prodigal as "brother"; much

pharisaic suggestion of his own propriety; offensive and ungenerous statements about "this thy son" having "devoured thy living with harlots"—which was a random remark. To all such jealous railings, the father meekly listens. "Son," he said in calm expostulation, "thou art ever with me"—never ranked among the lost—"and all that is mine is thine." There could not possibly be similar rejoicings over you, being one ever at my side, and held on all hands in esteem. Allow something to the fulness of a father's heart, when he sees the break in the home circle healed. Long absent, long lamented; and only now returned as from an exile's lot. Meet occasion, surely, for joy of the extraordinary kind. "This thy brother"—how gentle the rebuke ("thy brother")—"was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and is found."

Here we have the supreme lesson of the story: a lesson common to it and the previous tales, namely, that exceeding joy marks the return of penitents, as being the recovery of something lost, in contrast to the sober satisfaction merely which is felt over those who have never left the lines. The staid happiness associated with the even tenor of possession is one thing, and jubilation] when the sadly missed are suddenly restored is another. "Likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than

over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance" (ver. 7).

No doubt this salient feature of unwonted joy has emerged before the elder son is brought upon the scene: in which case it may be asked, why was the parable prolonged? But the brother really comes in as a foil, his cold and unsympathetic attitude setting off the warmth and effusive cordiality of the father. The picture, after all, is one, and its subject is the reception given to the lost boy. The far land, and the uncharitable elder brother, give us abundance of shadow; but all else bathes us in the glorious light, which shines from the benevolent and broadly beaming countenance of the father. And we have to remember, as chief key to an understanding of the earthly career of Jesus, that His teaching was delivered only too often in militant circumstances. The incident of the elder brother is but a returning, at the close, to the note sounded at the first, namely, that some seemingly religious folk are harsh in attitude to the lowly and the outcast. They miss, in short, the lesson of the Shepherd with his straying sheep: "It is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish" (Matt. xviii. 14). Jesus was virtually holding up a mirror to the Scribes and Pharisees, in which they could see themselves reflected as the elder brother: an eminently moral, a dutifully plodding, but an utterly

unamiable man. Like him, they were complacent about never transgressing the commandments; scrupulous about ceremonies; "serving" literally in the field, since the God of their thoughts was a severe master, with Law and Order for motto. God to them was not the kindly Father pictured by Jesus, whose service is perfect freedom, and in whose presence it is a joy to be; One in whom, when the Spirit is upon us, we feel that we have "all" (ver. 31). That class of religionist in Church circles, alas! was not confined to the days in which the recording Evangelist so happily fixed for us his noble chapter. In fact, to those of somewhat faithless outlook, it almost appears that the type is permanent in Christian history. Certainly people who get case-hardened in their religious views and practices are in perpetual danger of becoming pharisaic in tone, and marplots of truly human joy. Ruled by the wrong spirit, they are "angry, and will not go in" with those who are their brothers before God.

XVII

THE GREAT FEAST

“A certain man made a great supper; and he bade many: and he sent forth his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for *all* things are now ready. And they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a field, and I must needs go out and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. And the servant came, and told his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor and maimed and blind and lame. And the servant said, Lord, what thou didst command is done, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and constrain them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, that none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper.”—LUKE xiv. 16-24 (R.V.).

WHAT class in society around us is most fitly the object, to a religious mind, of generous thoughts and sacrificing deeds? That is the topic, and as the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus shows, it touches unerringly and most practically a vital point. There a person conventionally blameless is found to be spiritually wanting, because neglecting the outcast and suffering at his

door. Here Jesus would broaden the lesson by a new story, of which the keynote is a sentence found a little earlier in the chapter : " When thou makest a feast bid the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind : and thou shalt be blessed " (ver. 13). Personal friends or relatives, and social equals, are those to whom we naturally incline to be attentive in that matter, and Jesus does not aver that there is anything wrong in this, on its merits. But the Gospel spirit will carry us on a flood of feeling beyond such relative distinctions, and widen the sphere of benevolence to classes more specifically in need. The passage shows us a very simple, but very powerful, parable to this effect ; although the original story is overlaid by certain amplifications, and by a later enlargement of its scope.

Once upon a time there was a man who gave a supper. It was a splendid affair, and he bade many—the invitations were like the feast itself, lavish to the last degree. And at supper-time, with the customary politeness of a village host, he sent round a servant with intimation of the near hour of assembly. " Come," said he to those that had been bidden, " things are now ready." But strange to tell, they all with one consent began to make excuse. The first said he had bought a piece of ground, and must needs go out and see it. The invitation, however, was of some standing,

and he might in honour have put off his land-surveying for a day or two. Surely he had a good general idea of the ground already, before he secured it. A second, in answer to the servant, said he had bought five yoke of oxen, and was going to prove them. But was not this also ungracious, putting profit for himself before loyalty to his friend. He could have postponed for a little the testing of his new teams. So that we must pronounce his excuse—unlike, let us hope, his fresh-bought cattle—rather lame. And a third specimen—for it is only types we are getting—had what he also considered a very serious engagement: he had married a wife, and therefore he could not come. Pray, what would have been the loss of a single day among so many, and these presumably so happy? Under matrimony he seems degenerate. He should have torn himself away for a time from domestic bliss; he should have gone to the great supper. But he is not even courteous to the messenger. The other two prayed to be excused, but this young husband says bluntly, “I cannot come.”

The broad effect, then, was this. Those on the honoured list of invitations, his social equals, failed to turn up; sending somewhat superficial apologies. A very awkward situation thereby was created, which led to drastic action by the master of the house. He was not only annoyed, but positively “angry”; especially,

we can imagine, when he heard from the servant some of the reasons annexed. And what will an angry man not do? Here was a huge entertainment all prepared, and apparently all spoiled. "Go out quickly into the streets," he cried to his slave,—we are meant to see irate impatience in the phrase,—and not simply to the thoroughfares, but to the "lanes of the city," the homes of the humblest, and "bring in hither"—don't simply invite, but fetch with you—"the poor and maimed and blind and lame." The very class, be it observed, indicated by Jesus as the best object of a good man's liberality. This should be noted as the crisis in a purely adventitious situation. The central picture of the story—theme for painter or poetic artist to portray—is that, while the better-off hung back, the poor and the unfortunate streamed up joyfully, and made a motley and unexpected, but none the less, a happy gathering.¹ And here, according to the version of the first Evangelist (Matt. xxii. 8-10), the story properly ends. There was but one sending out of servants in search; the place filled quickly with an excited host, and rampant joy was over all.

Some may think this a sudden termination to the tale; but it is quite in the manner of the Master.

¹ The writer always thinks here of the poet Burns, looking in at the Mauchline inn upon a certain jovial scene, and going home to work out his truly human and most dramatic piece, *The Jolly Beggars*.

Whenever He has reached the crucial point in His bold and rapid pictures, He stops drawing, so to speak, and leaves to imagination the rest. On our part, fancy should become at once ebullient—the audience of Jesus was a popular one—and in this particular case a vision should spring up of the abandon of joy within that lighted room. Who has not seen, at modern “Treats” to the poor, and seen with inward pleasure, the satisfaction that gleams upon a sea of faces—the wrinkled countenance of age, or the countenance careworn from tragic trial, discovered in a state of beam, like the play of light beneath the cloudlet on the hill. The sorest heart can catch the rejuvenating spirit of that hour; and I verily believe the lame and the maimed in the parable, as the evening wore on, waved their sticks and crutches in the air. The reader who can think of this, is not far from the kernel of the tale. Exulting joy, says Jesus, arises when certain things are done by us in the true abnegating spirit of the religious life—a joy akin to that which arose when Lazarus reached the couch beside Abraham; a joy like that in yet another story of the Master’s—the extraordinary festivities when the poor prodigal came home, and the fatted calf was killed. The method of the parable, it should be noted, is exactly the same as that employed in the Unjust Steward, namely, a very striking earthly

situation is developed, in seemingly fortuitous fashion; and we are bidden reach, in the heavenly sphere, the very same result—not fortuitously, however, but by conscious spiritual endeavour. We are to take up the cross, and lay ourselves out for the necessitous; in which event the joys of salvation are extended, and Gospel success is more and more assured. If this be the strong and simple force of the original parable, then the aversion to hospitality with social equals has nothing final about it. That is but part of the mechanism of a tale which urges that real generosity goes beyond convention, and aims at the elevation of the unfortunate.¹

One of the company, we are told (ver. 15), struck by our Lord's new philosophy of feasts, cried out: "Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God": a saying² quite in sympathy with the Master's

¹ Professor Jülicher argues for a polemical occasion on which the story would be told. But surely this is not in the least degree necessary, when we have the express moral of vv. 12-14 staring us in the face. It is only in the elaborated version of the parable that polemic appears. The writer, for one, is jealous of anything that would weaken the wholesome impression produced by so many modern writings about Jesus, namely, that far more than many formerly thought He was the quiet Teacher in Galilee who loved to unfold the principles and the practice of the higher life.

² Jülicher, in his keenly observant way, says this exclamation has "not precisely the colour of Luke's diction, but he will have woven it in here." One may suggest that if it had fallen the way of the first Evangelist, instead of the third, he would have connected its idea, and its use of the word "blessed," with the fourth of the Beatitudes. The literary craftsmanship ("weaving it in") of Luke is well illustrated in this whole chapter (xiv.). The discourse of Jesus must have been

teaching, and based upon the familiar figure, that in the ideal age to come, the faithful shall sit down with the time-honoured heroes of the faith — Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the rest. It is a figure which Jesus employed in His last hours ; taking special account, however, not of the ancient worthies, but of the disciples, His endeared companions, with whom He should share the felicity. This is an image which binds together the group of parables we are now considering. The supreme triumph should emerge in festal joy, when the holiness of God's law was at last realised among men : a realisation which was to arise from the true substance of the law being written, in fresh inward power, in men's hearts, by a covenant of which His own life was to be the blood of sprinkling. In this sense, He was to drink of the fruit of the vine "new" (*i.e.* of a new *kind*) in the Kingdom of God. In the ages that were gone the sovereignty of God in the lives of His children had been slow to come in real form. But now it should arrive, in joyful benefits for man ; for the one Holy Spirit that could save was abroad, entering the great heart of humanity, and bringing about moral revival from within.

rich in table-talk ; and our Evangelist, finding himself in possession of a collection of such pieces, seems to have strung them together under picture of a Great Feast, because he felt that it was this kind of gathering which gave occasion to each. This particular saying he makes a bridge of, to pass from one topic to another.

“Lord, what thou didst command is done,” cried the slave, “and yet there is room.” This is an accretion peculiar to Luke—the idea of a second message. At a banquet blank seats are depressing; and the generous instincts of the provider were unsatisfied. “Go out,” he said, “into the highways”—to the wanderers beyond the city walls—“and to the hedges,” where you’ll come upon poor outcasts, who envy the very birds and foxes, and have not where to lay their heads. “Constrain them to come in”—away with their shyness and scruples as vagrants, about entering as they are the hospitable hall. Be urgent to a fault, for the feast-room must be filled.

The story has now, in later hands than those of Jesus, we perceive, become an allegory, rather than a parable proper. And three classes, on this reading, rise in succession before the mind’s eye. First of all, God’s chosen race, who had despised the call. Formally they desired to share the Messianic feast, and even seemed to have accepted the invitation to eat bread in the Kingdom of God among the blessed. But when the hour of testing came, they were found lacking in the truly responsive spirit. They delighted in the old ceremonies of the faith; and as Abraham’s children they thought their seats in the festal chamber were secured. But below the surface, their personal attitude to the weighty matters of the law was radically wrong.

They were callous and unspiritual, virtual slights of the long-standing invitation of their God. Prophet after prophet came to them: John the Baptist, Jesus Himself in the fulness of the times; but they all with one consent began to make excuse. The world, in this way or in that, was too much with them.

Is God's purpose, then, to fail? Nay, the message must go wider to those about the streets and lanes. The Gospel was preached with power to publicans and sinners: the despised and degraded among the Jews, who had no part in the pride of ordinances, although they were within the City which Jehovah blessed. And these responded gladly to the summons; they sat down in the Kingdom of God. They were the "poor," the bankrupt in soul, the destitute in spirit: they were the "maimed," the bruised and the bleeding in the battle of life: they were the "halt," the toilsome and uncertain wanderers on the road of righteousness: they were the "blind," the deceived of sin, groping in wayward fashion after truth divine.

And yet does this exhaust the gracious purpose of God? No, a wider circle must be swept. The feast is for man as man, and the heathen beyond the precincts of Zion were to be sought out by missionary servants of God. In the name of Jesus, holiest type of messenger, these last were to exhaust the highways of the world, and constrain even the most wretched to come

in. It is a festival for which the guests are not all gathered: one for which many daily are a sacrifice; the expansive ideal of the sovereignty of God; society regenerate and joyful; the Hope of Humanity to come.

And this calling of the Gentiles, of which the echoes are not silent yet, prepares us for a truly Pauline pronouncement at the close. God's own people, we are told, were rejected, or had rejected themselves. For the time being, if not finally, they must be dealt with in providence as an unbelieving generation. "None of those men which were bidden," cried the still irate host, "shall taste of my supper." The first Evangelist, thinking no doubt of the Fall of Jerusalem, is even more emphatic: "But the King was wroth; and he sent his armies, and destroyed those murderers [of the messengers], and burned their city" (Matt. xxii. 7).

The peril is perpetual, that we should have souls for nothing beyond business; and be the prey of the fascinations of pleasure, or overwhelmed with earth's cares. Beware of the heart which, when appealed to for sacrifice, straightway prays to be excused, because it looks to low interests and is grievously conformed to this world. Let your life go out from you for sorrowing humanity. Do good, as the Master here teaches, to the poor, the afflicted, the despairing, and ye shall be

guests at the holy assemblage—the “blessed,” who eat bread in the Kingdom of God. Think of the pure life of Jesus, given so ungrudgingly, as blood-offering at the Feast. Feel the call most when ye sit down at, and rise from, that emblem of it all, the Table of the Lord. Come, come! is the cry of God’s Spirit, wrestling with hardened hearts: a cry of long ages, and a cry in every land. All through the Bible, it strikes upon the listening ear of faith. The Divine Wisdom, spreading her banquet, calleth from the highest places: “Come, eat of my bread, and drink of the wine which I have mingled. Forsake the foolish and live, and walk in the way of understanding.”

XVIII

DIVES AND LAZARUS

“Now there was a certain rich man, and he was clothed in purple and fine linen, faring sumptuously every day : and a certain beggar named Lazarus was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table ; yea, even the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and that he was carried away by the angels into Abraham’s bosom : and the rich man also died, and was buried. And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue ; for I am in anguish in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things : but now here he is comforted, and thou art in anguish. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, that they which would pass from hence to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from thence to us. And he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house ; for I have five brethren ; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. But Abraham saith, They have Moses and the prophets ; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham : but if one go to them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, if one rise from the dead.”—LUKE xvi. 19–31 (R.V.).

To souls like Jesus, who see the ravens fed, the grass clothed, and not a sparrow forgotten before God,

material advantages are the immaterial consideration. Give them but the Holy Spirit, with their simple trust in a loving Father's care, and their practical experience of God's providence, they can never feel forsaken or defenceless. For them the highest wealth is within, to be had without money and without price. By contrast, all else is worthless. "Things are not what they seem."

The moral enforced by the new story is this, that the soul living for self-indulgence, and thoroughly "worldly" in spirit, neglecting mercy and pity for others, is perverted and poor, spiritually damned. In His most incisive mood, Jesus appraises the divine and human values, respectively, of earthly grandeur and estate. He cuts through the surface of things, and shows us the man of the world in section; proving that in the matter of visible possessions the person who seems wealthy and of substantial position, is often, on the contrary, destitute and hollow as regards the higher life—his assets of richness and strength of character singularly small. Such is Dives, the luxuriously living worldling of the parable, and its leading personage. For Lazarus is a secondary figure; he is foil to the other, the heavy shading in the picture, the background from which the rich man stands out in bold relief.

First, we have man's point of view, artistically put ;

the scene where the sordid hero is living in ample luxury, with everything at hand, "which is exalted among men" (ver. 15). Then we have the divine point of view: the scene where this same rich man is degraded in the sphere of the eternal. His worldly characteristics, so loudly approved elsewhere, are held in abhorrence in the new and totally different plane of being and of thinking; they are declared roundly to be "an abomination in the sight of God" (ver. 15). Of necessity, we can only look at two pictures one after the other. Yet our Lord wishes us to think of them together; meaning as He does, that if we are like the mere man of the world in the first part, we are at the same time the empty and poor creature described in the second. If we think of the story as simply describing an un-Christian man before death and after it, we shall lose the deep lesson of the whole. Rather it is a double picture of the man in this life: one descriptive of the visible, and the other of the invisible side of him. The latter shows what *in* the man God Almighty disapproves; and the former, what *about* the man the world envies and applauds.

Dives had everything which the world in typical mood highly prizes. He was "rich," and so could indulge unbridled fancy, studying every bodily comfort or extravagance. Then he was "clothed in purple and

fine linen "; his outer garment of the hue affected by royalty, the costliest purple of Tyre, and his inner vest of the fine linen of Egypt, which was equally expensive. Both were fashionable in those days, marks of distinguished attire. And the final touch in the grandeur of this favourite of fortune, perhaps the most notable element in his personal habits, was this, that he "fared sumptuously every day," or as the marginal reading of the R.V. has it, he was "living in mirth and splendour every day." The idea is, that there was many a brave banquet about the house, and that he enjoyed immensely the daily satisfying of his appetites.

Such was Dives, a man living by the world and for the world. Not that he was flagrantly sinful. There is no mention of his being vicious, and an open violator of the law. On the contrary, we can imagine him respected in society. But withal he was unspiritual in his aspirations, an earth-worm in temper and in tone. It was the temporal, not the eternal, that engrossed him; he lived not for others, but to himself. He knew nothing of sacrifice, and therefore nothing of salvation as a personal affair. He fared sumptuously—but did not feed the hungry. His stores were full of goods—but the chambers of his mind were void of compassion. In purple and fine linen he was clad—but he never clothed the naked. Though he was

fabulously rich, he considered not the case of the needy, and therefore he was poor, yea, unspeakably poor.

This much we gather, when we come to the characteristic test of Jesus—the man's treatment of the forlorn beggar at his door. His, we are forced to infer, was a heart of stone; for had he been humane, here was opening to the full for melting tenderness—this wretch in rags, lying there in penury and pain, and dying at last in abject misery. There is much graphic detail, as usual, crowded into the cameo. Think of the mere idea of being a "beggar"—without friends or money, dependent on chance charity, and having, as the name "Lazarus" implies, only God for his help. Moreover, he was "full of sores." Yes, shudder at the thought—I have a tale, like Hamlet's ghost, will "harrow up thy soul." Some lingering, loathsome disease, like leprosy, made him an object of aversion. In this melancholy condition, he was laid at the rich man's gate, or thrown down (the word suggests) as if his attendants had wearied of their burden, and now abandoned him under the eye of abundance. The rich man, clearly, is without excuse as regards opportunity of being benevolent; for he could not leave or enter the portal of his dwelling without perceiving the poor man's plight—his plaintive and imploring eye, his filthy rags, his wan

countenance, wasted with disease. Himself accustomed to princely living, he should have felt for Lazarus the more. But no; oh hard-hearted, inhuman creature, himself beggar among beggars before God, he leaves him to pine on, although that pallid face of his was imprinted on his memory, for he remembered it in Hades, amid the agonies of an accusing conscience. And how little might have sufficed the suppliant! But the picture is consistently severe—even fragments that fell from the rich man's table were denied him. Such would go to the dogs, that prowl in and out about an Eastern town. Even these dumb animals showed more humanity—they "came and licked his sores"—a note that heightens the squalor of the scene, for the dog was "unclean" among the Jews. Unbandaged were the gaping wounds—no "fine linen" for them. It was left to the humble hounds, most faithful of the brute creation, to moisten with smooth tongues the beggar's sores, as they might have done their own.

So much for the first phase of the parable—the rich man's glory according to the world, and his gross neglect of opportunities for the cultivation of loving-kindness and the graces of the inner life. Now let us inquire within, and see the poverty-stricken condition of the soul. We shall find that worldliness, however fair and prosperous on the surface, carries unheavenli-

ness in the heart. It means misery, spiritual destitution, in that unseen realm, which is near, yea, present to us all.

To Dives and to Lazarus alike, the last enemy appeared: the grim King of terrors, whose form is unseen, and his footsteps unheard, but who is coming surely and swiftly to all. First to Lazarus, exhausted by disease and want, one to whom the messenger of God brought happy release. To the rich man later, as if given longer space for repentance. And when the beggar died, he found in another sphere the sympathy so long withheld; he was carried by the angels to "Abraham's bosom"—a phrase from the doctors of the law, and emblematic of intimate communion with the highest. Lazarus, once waited upon by unclean dogs, is now ministered to by angels; once craving vainly for crumbs, he looks before him at the heavenly feast—compensated for his woes upon the earth by reclining on the breast of the Father of the Faithful, who is pictured as presiding at the fellowship of Paradise, guardian there of those departed in the faith, until Messiah Himself shall appear, and inaugurate the full-orbed splendours of the Feast.

The rich man also died and was buried. In the case of Lazarus, the body is not mentioned—an Eastern outcast might not be buried at all, the corpse left to

shrivel in the sun, the bones to bleach upon the plain. Not so his rich brother—yes, brother, although Dives might have scorned the epithet. And what a grand funeral procession it would be, this rich great man's, or rather this rich poor man's, with measured pomp of circumstance, and all the trailing trappings of woe—elegiacs from paid pipers, and hired mourners simulating sorrow, with “windy suspiration of forced breath.” What an ironical performance! This is all that his money-bags can do for him now. The last pinch of unrelenting fate has come. No angels for him; no gracious, white-winged, ministering spirits from the most high God, to take him, like Lazarus, to the abode of bliss; no seat far forward at the celestial table with the exalted patriarch. Ah no, “in Hell.” “In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame” (vv. 23, 24). Still figures from the Rabbis—Hades being the temporary abode of all departed spirits, with Paradise as the place of repose for the pious at the one end, and Gehenna as the baleful region of the bad at the other. Smile we may at old-world symbolism, but the spiritual fact remains, beneath the lurid scene, that the rich man

had a rude awakening from his life of worldliness. He was indeed in torment—reproached by the memory of lost opportunities of sacrifice, agonised in conscience, entirely miserable in the thought that there seems, now, no place of repentance—"a great gulf" fixed, in virtue of eternal law. The "good things" of the former sphere are balanced by the "evil" experiences of the other; and there are seen to be equivalents in life, more than meet the common eye. He who gave not the crumb of comfort, for instance, has to implore a drop of water for his tongue. The position of the two men is inverted; for Dives is now the beggar—the spiritually destitute, as worldlings every day and every hour are. And Lazarus—emblem of the poor rich in faith, the humble-circumstanced who look to God for their help—is now "highly esteemed" before God, the Lazarus who was formerly "abomination" in the sight of men.¹

¹ Here, probably, the parable originally ended. The dialogue of the dead annexed, we can think of as developed in the speakings at the weekly meetings, from which the third Evangelist drew his distinctive material. The whole chapter seems strung on the thread of references to covetousness and our true relation to earthly goods. The Pharisees were "lovers of money" (ver. 14), yet justified themselves on the subject in the sight of men (ver. 15). With elaborate, but futile, self-excusing they tried to live for two worlds (ver. 13), and Jesus is here convicting them of the kind of religion which is akin to superstition. The hypocritical, when in a difficulty, incline to believe in magical effects. Hence the suggestion, that "if one rose from the dead" (ver. 31), many a son of Abraham must be saved from the bankrupt and

The broad lesson is obvious. Worldliness, however prosperous, spells vanity, in virtue of immutable principles; it entails spiritual misery, and this not merely to-morrow, but to-day. Only riches of the higher kind can be soul-satisfying; and these can be produced practically by our getting into gear with the life illustrated by Jesus. We should spend and be spent, like Him, on the poor and the unfortunate around us. If we have His spirit and so are enabled to abound in deeds of mercy, we are wealthy in the real sense, clothed in the royal purple, the vesture of salvation; feasting on the true food of the soul, faring sumptuously every day. Our life is centred in, and sustained by, the goodness which is heaven; saved from the evil and its consequences which is the spiritual hell. Poverty, no doubt, can be extreme, and has its own drawbacks—being no part, however, of the ideal society—but poverty never can be the secret of misery. That lies in alienation from God, and God's cause. The key to happiness is a holiness of mind and motive and practical effort, which is as open to the meanest beggar

ruinous result pictured. To which self-deceiving suggestion the crushing answer comes—crushing to people who made the name of Moses a cloak for covetousness—that the great lawgiver's name was against them (ver. 29), for Moses and the prophets, rightly understood, conveyed the root-teaching of the parable. The Pharisees, like Dives, were without excuse; for one more eloquent even than Lazarus had been at their doors.

on the highway as to the resplendent plutocrat. Relationship of some kind to the higher realm of the inner world is inevitable on our part, ignore it though we may. The nature of that relationship, in individual cases, is fixed as in a Doomsday-book, by the use we make of things earthly, whether these be few or many. Is our daily life selfish or sacrificing? Does it savour of the world or of the Cross? Have we the heart that feels for others' wants, like those of Lazarus, and lays itself out on their behalf? Dives never dreamt of this in his philosophy, and so did not escape condemnation, wrapping himself up in his luxuries and having no tender thoughts for the beggar at his gate. The two fates, with lightning clearness, are before us; and escape from the great moral issue is impossible. "God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth unto his own flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth unto the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap eternal life."

XIX

THE WEDDING GARMENT

“The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a certain king, which made a marriage feast for his son. . . . But when the king came in to behold the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding-garment : and he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding-garment ? And he was speechless. Then the king said to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and cast him out into the outer darkness ; there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth.”—MATT. xxii. 2 and 11-13 (R.V.).

BRILLIANT was the chamber ; bountiful the banqueting board ; there were places for a thousand guests. And why ? it was a wedding—the marriage of the King’s son. Right royal, therefore, had been the scale of preparation, and all the people were agog. Diffused the notes of jubilation, and exalted the prospect of enjoyment. The oxen and the fatlings were killed (ver. 4) ; wine no doubt was forthcoming, as at Cana. All things were ready ; the cry was, Come to the marriage-feast !

Imagine now the guests gathered in that palace, resplendently belit. The king and kingly party are

to enter, and be greeted with acclaim. But there was a blot on the feast. What shadow is this, by which suddenly the gladsome scene is overcast? The king, with scrutinising gaze, saw there “a man which had not on a wedding-garment.” The point would quickly catch the eye; when a marriage-party passes, among ourselves, we take in the situation at a glance. There are the wedding “favours,” or some special get-up for the occasion—by the very gloves the secret is betrayed. This holds true of the poorest of the poor; for they would despise themselves—that last indignity possible to man—if they did not appear, on the great day, in the appropriate garb. However crude in some quarters, there is this ritual everywhere, which strait convention has decreed. That is the issue of which the parable takes account. There was a certain absence of right feeling, seen in and proved by this obtrusive breach of decorum. Call it thoughtless if you choose, it was within the range of personal responsibility. The affair, moreover, was a public ceremonial, not a private function. At an ordinary ball, what a flurry would fly up if some sorry individual did not appear in evening-dress; much more on State occasions, when forms and rubrics are exacting. How autocratic in Court circles is your Lord Chamberlain; and how critical the glances of Yellow-plush at the door! Fancy unwary Hodge

approaching, to peep about the legs of that Colossus ! In the case supposed, the king's majesty was at stake. And we see he is a king from his behaviour, when his critical eye rested on the defaulter—who, unlike the returning Prodigal, had not the "best robe" furbished out for him. Instead of instantly condemning, the king with gracious condescension presumes an explanation can be offered. "Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding-garment?" But the culprit instantly took guilt—"he was speechless." Here was one who had underestimated alike the privilege and the conditions, bringing down on his poor head the royal condemnation. It is so easy on crucial occasions, over a seemingly small thing, to give mortal offence. At a Royal Drawing-room, conversation is subdued and limited in topic. Debatable matters are eschewed, and high argument is never heard. The pure ideal is genial, and dignified, and catholic enjoyment. Offenders, male or female, would speedily be put down. Here the offender was put out. "Bind him hand and foot," cried the king to his minions—Eastern potentates are pictured as terrible in wrath—"and cast him out into the outer darkness; there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth." As the door opens we see the flash for a moment, from that lighted hall, now forfeited through contempt of court. A pall of thickening gloom settles

down upon the figure of the extruded one, whose wailing wakes the echoes of the night. His cardinal error was complacency, seen in defects of reverence and of essential sympathy. He thought he was good enough for the king to take him as he stood.

What the illustration is meant to enforce seems to be this, that it is one thing to come to the high feast of religion, and another to have one's acceptability established. On their merits, some are pronounced not well-pleasing to God, because, along with their formal response, they do not exhibit in their personality the fruits of good living. Fruits have always a distinctive flavour of their own; and in the case of the true Christian there is an unmistakable "manner of spirit," which comes out in everything he thinks and says and does. God's cause is so bound up with goodness, that conditions of acceptance with Him are of necessity coloured through and through with that hue. Thus the Evangelist, in working up to the *dénouement* of his story, prepares us by the hint that the guests were "both bad and good" (ver. 10); and it readily accords with the teaching of Jesus elsewhere, that it is on the lines of character and spiritual achievement that the cleavage emerges, which fixes the fate of the two classes. According to an apostle, three salient qualities of the Kingdom are righteousness and peace

and joy; and that ethical trinity is so much a unity that the rich presence, as at a feast, of the two latter presupposes, and is dependent upon, the active power of the former—that “righteousness” which should invest us like a robe. The people are apt to be plentiful, however, who wish to enjoy things without doing anything themselves; and the day of their visitation is portrayed in the penetrating look of the giver of the feast, who had a judicial gaze that required to be met.

One recalls here that in the story of the Net, the fateful inspection centres similarly in a single critical act—that of putting the good fish to one side, and throwing the bad to another or over the gunwale into the sea. In the impressive story likewise of the Sheep and the Goats, what ruled the movements of the dividing wand was the intensely moral question—Did you do the works of Love? Of the two sons in another anecdote, the one instantly condemned was he who said, “Yes,” yet showed no following obedience in the life. He was convicted, in short, of pharisaic hollowness. Those depicted here as wanting in the wedding-garment are near relatives of his: persons ready to sit down to the enjoyment of a splendid meal, but found, through their own thoughtlessness, to be not in a state to have seats assigned to them. Nominally members

of the great Kingdom, they are discovered on a searching scrutiny not to have realised its righteousness.

The warning, we readily gather from history, was appropriate to many around Jesus, who were prone to lean upon privilege and neglect vital duty. As belonging to the chosen race, they felt "called" to the Kingdom; and because they had Abraham for their father, they seemed to themselves enrolled and installed in the divine favour. Ecclesiastical connection, spiritual pedigree, was to save them. But in reality, as this impressive imagery conveys, the one essential condition is an entirely personal habit of Holiness. By his prison-clothes a man is seen to be a convict; and return to normal garb is evidence that his liberty has been restored. So of him who is no more the slave of Satan, but the citizen of Zion. He is invested with the robe of righteousness; fit for presence at the Great Feast, real sharer in the festal joy of the redeemed.

There is an investing passage in Matthew (xxii. 3-10, and 14) which speaks of armies destroying murderers and burning their city (ver. 7); and from this the presumption seems clear, that the version, as we have it, took form after the Fall of Jerusalem. Parable, in the light of such events, naturally tended to pass into allegory. In the simple version of the

third Evangelist, where the exquisitely fashioned story shows lowly stooping Love causing extraordinary joy among the poor, the giver of the feast is a layman; but here it is a royal gathering, which fits in with the glowing picture in Revelation of the "marriage-supper of the Lamb." Jesus as the King's Son is to lead His Bride, who is the Church, to the altar of Divine Love. Man and God are seen to be united in solidarity of satisfaction; rich home-feelings are in evidence, which tell of harmony and peace and joy. Thus the feast that follows on the marriage is token for all time of Communion; souls melted in spiritual fellowship, life pictured (by the most natural of images) as in the exalted mood, happy in the sense of salvation. On this view and to the apostolic age, the allegory was directed against those who made light of the invitation to the royal wedding, and who represented the stiff-necked, would-be religious people in Israel; while the one filling up (ver. 10) of the wedding with outside guests means the coming in of the Gentile converts, who were found righteous in fact, in succession to those who were righteous only in name. This seems the key to Matthew's recension of a story, which we can trace more truly to its origin in Luke xiv. In the First Gospel, in short, we have an original parable of the Wedding Garment, expressive of that abhorrence which Jesus ever felt

towards merely seeming piety; and in blended union therewith, we have a version of the Feast-anecdote, wrought up into an allegory, and highly serviceable in the circumstances of the Early Church. That Church had reason to lament that in its ranks the "bad" were found along with the "good" (ver. 10). When God's Kingdom began more quickly to extend, converts of adult age might pass into the Church by the ceremony of Baptism without very deep touching of the heart, or saving movement of the mind. They could press past the attendants at the door, so to speak, and while ranking as adherents or associates, not be living branches of the Vine. In all ages the pharisaic show marvellous powers of self-deception; they blandly take advantage of the generous summons of the Church (ver. 14), yet cleave the while to the earthly idols of their hearts. The disciplinary effect of a discourse, delivered in this vein of Matthew at one of the weekly meetings of those primitive days, must have been great indeed. An ultimate fact of the situation, then as now, is that for real entrance to the Kingdom a certain receptive faculty is needed: not merely sympathy with the Gospel aim, but a keen appreciation of its powers and an inspiration of the zeal which leads to sacrifice therefor. The faith that saves, it should never be forgotten, includes intellect and will as well as heart. All must

be captured and devoted to that goodness which is God, and which is seen once for all, on the Bible page, to be supremely feasible in Jesus Christ our Lord.

The parable, let it be said, should come home, on suggestive lines of self-examination, to those who frequent the services of the sanctuary to-day, and sit down betimes at the still abiding Feast. How grave the fear for the most regular of church attenders, that Christian profession tends to become mechanical; that we are not truly clothed with the Holy Spirit into which we were baptized, and that we are being wrapped the more in the tightening bonds of worldly selfishness. The motto of the true aspirant to the fellowship of the saints in light is, Put on Christ. Feel the power of His life; show the grace of His character; take up the Cross daily, and spend yourself for man in His spirit. Then shall your better nature be satisfied, as at a heavenly feast: the soul that hungers after righteousness shall be filled; the heart that well-nigh fainted shall be revived as at a well-spring by the way. God and man, once sundered, can coalesce on Gospel lines in melting tenderness. Avaunt the thought, that the King appearing in His beauty, and beholding the guests, should say to any of ourselves, "I see no evidence in your lives that you delight to do My will, and are growing daily into the

likeness of My dear Son." We should be speechless. Woeful for us, if we lose the light of His countenance, the illumination of His Spirit! We are in the outer darkness—"there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth."

XX

THE TEN VIRGINS

“Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were foolish, and five were wise. For the foolish, when they took their lamps, took no oil with them : but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. Now while the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there is a cry, Behold, the bridegroom ! Come ye forth to meet him. Then all those virgins arose, and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said unto the wise, Give us of your oil ; for our lamps are going out. But the wise answered, saying, Peradventure there will be not enough for us and you : go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves. And while they went away to buy, the bridegroom came ; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage feast : and the door was shut. Afterward came also the other virgins, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us. But he answered and said, Verily I say unto you, I know you not. Watch therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour.”—MATT. xxv. 1-13 (R.V.).

“BEHOLD, the bridegroom !” Sharp and sudden, the cry rang out upon the startled midnight air—the cry of some porter on the watch. He was arriving at last, the somewhat tardy hero—“the gallant came late.” Not last to hear the call would be the bride, waiting bejewelled ; adorned for the husband, whose voice she

should soon rejoice greatly to hear. But the bride-maidens were locked in the arms of sleep. Not without natural excuse, for Jewish weddings were at night, and they had been kept waiting and waiting. To the home of the bride they had come, this company of virgins; thence to sally forth to meet the bridegroom, when his approach was heralded. Ten in number, and with not unusual divergences of character. Five we are asked to consider wise; and five otherwise, pronouncedly improvident. Each was furnished with a torch-like lamp, and we fancy we see them in mimic procession as they arrive; joyous in every gesture, gay as became the gay occasion. But the bridegroom's tarrying gave them pause; and we know that youthful excitement, if prolonged, insists upon a physical recoil—they fell asleep. The narrative, taken literally, is very graphic. As the evening wore on, they began to nod, and all of them (wise and unwise) finally succumbed. But lo! at midnight came that summons, "Behold, the bridegroom! Come ye forth to meet him." The effect was electric; everything was bustle, not a little was confusion. Lights must burn now, upon the witching hour, as they had never burned before. Wicks were trimmed, and oil instantly poured in, where needed. Lamps, if found blown out, were nervously re-lit. But here the imprudence of the foolish ones palpably appears; for they discover, with

dismay unspeakable, that their lights are growing dim, and they have not wherewithal to make replenishing. Thoughtlessly they had not taken separate vessels in supplement. "Give us of your oil," they cried beseechingly to their companions, "for our lamps are going out"—the feeble flame flickering visibly in the socket. But the wise, with their worldly prudence, responded: "Peradventure there will not be enough for us and you: go ye rather to them that sell, and buy for yourselves." An answer neither unnatural nor unreasonable, though not notably magnanimous. "They that were ready," when the bridegroom reached the threshold, "went in with him to the marriage feast." The others went away to buy; and oh, pathetic plight, when they returned "the door was shut." We hear the tragic echoes awakened by its bang, on the stroke of this most fateful hour. Too late, too late; like children crying in the night, ascends the wail, "Lord, Lord, open to us!" But the bridegroom was in no mood for niceties of sentiment—or was it the porter in the original tale—and chill despair must have settled down upon their hearts, as they heard the words, sounding like a death-knell, "I know you not." The irrevocable stage of things had come. Time and tide wait for no man; and opportunities, once missed, can never be recalled. The forlorn maidens are the object of

our pity; but the callous world will say at once that it was their own imprudence which brought about their woe. We must not leave the story, however, without passing in imagination to the festal joy within the lighted hall. It is there that we should stand, as we bethink us how it fared with the ten. Marriage is emblem of high fellowship with God; and the children of the bride-chamber rejoiced while the bridegroom was with them—those, that is, who were “ready” and “went in” to the “marriage feast” (ver. 10). The others, self-punished, were excluded and in gloom.

Memory recalls at once the other marriage-story of the Master, the parable of the Wedding-garment. There the person improperly qualified got in somehow, but was summarily turned out. Here, more happily, offenders were checkmated at the door.¹ In both cases there is the one moral—Without holiness (sanctification) no man shall see the Lord; and the tales were provoked by a pronounced feature in the religious life of Palestine, namely, that men had too much the forms of godliness without the power thereof. The rank and file of the Jewish Church, in the days of

¹ Compare Luke xiii. 24-29—a passage singularly informing as to our Lord's habit of thought on this subject. Jesus was familiar from youth with the family feasts at Nazareth, social and religious. What a vital moment it was, on the more ceremonious occasions, when the master of the house rose to bar the door, and render peace inviolate!

Jesus, were terribly in need of this rebuke. They boasted of privilege, but were lacking in personal devotion; they gloried in mechanical traditions; enslaved by the letter, strangers to the Spirit which giveth life. The vessel on the outside was brightly burnished; but when times of testing came, there was no oil within. They were lamps that flared up; but men looked, and lo, they were not. Where, oh where, were the grace and tenderness in daily life, that mark the spiritual mind?

For the great body of professing Christians, these two things remain. On the one hand, the ideal of the kind of joy that is heavenly, as pictured; uninterrupted and complete, when the door is shut against all that is morally alien thereto. And on the other, the necessity for the presence in us of the personal spirit of piety, the spirit of faith and hope and love, the spirit subtle as oil, which alone can illumine and lend lustre to life. Men may openly avow the Gospel cause, and wave their lamps in some approved fashion, and seem to leave the world behind them, and go forth to join themselves to Christ; but still the line of demarcation runs—the foolish and the wise. Not all do enter into the joy of their Lord. Some have no unction of the Spirit, no shining qualities of character, such as they might have learned by quiet intercourse with Jesus Himself. Has

it been religious thoughtlessness, or want of prayer and self-scrutiny? The Spirit of holiness is everything: the freely moving, the ever-radiating Spirit, which enters into, and comes out of, every aspect of our life. We are taken back by the principle at stake, as so often happens, to the Sermon on the Mount—"let your light so shine before men." Jesus is resetting in the parable an old lesson: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. vii. 21). The pure, the loving, the sacrificing life, is all in all. "If any man," cried the apostle, "have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."

No doubt the Evangelist, when putting his narratives in shape, had a dominating thought of his own as to what the proper keynote of the Gospel page should be. Thus it was that our story, in his hands, however striking on its own merits, took on a special colouring. It was turned to account for the benefit of the apostolic age, following the departure of Jesus: an age in which strong emotions were in vogue regarding His Second Coming. All this is reflected in the added moral and motto: "Watch therefore, for ye know not the day nor the hour" (ver. 13). We must remember here, as background, the widespread expectation that the end of all things was at hand, and Christ was to

return for personal reign in a world renewed. The cataclysmic event was to come as a thief in the night.¹ It should burst, like the flood in the days of Noah, on scenes of fancied security, where the number of the unprepared should be lamentably large. Truly fateful should this day of the appearing be, only its date was uncertain. The great question, therefore, for the individual everywhere was, would the moment of trial find him off his guard? "Watch," in the whole circumstances, was the saving motto; for, if prepared always, no individual hour could show them non-alert. Religion, in any case, should not be intermittent. But many fail from want of diligence in self-culture; the flame that seemed so well kindled, expires in the earthen vessel of their life. The essential oil is lacking; and at the hour of which they reckon not, a rude awakening will occur, as with the foolish maids. Conscience gets agonised, and scales fall from their eyes, when calamity tears the world from their heart. The instinct of some will be, to run to the priests. Sacramentarian methods are handy for the improvident, who find their higher life feeble and flickering. Traffickers in these methods are never far away, nor is the constituency small which thinks religion can be borrowed. But the real article is so personal and

¹ For Luke's simpler version of the connection between Watching and Feasting, see chap. xii. vv. 35-40.

so intimate, that it can never be extraneously arranged. Grace is only God's to give within the soul, and no man or woman born has superfluity. Not off earthly altars is the lamp replenished. It is faith that justifies, the faith which vitalises in individual careers. Read in the right light, there was wisdom in that saying of the wise: "Buy for yourselves."

For the rest, a modern world will note the stern fact, on which the crisis of the story turns, that our careers being finite, a time does come when our chances are exhausted. Was that not the feeling Jesus had, when he saw the fig-tree withered, and now sapless, "No more—for ever"? The day of grace gets past and gone, for good or for ill; and life-results are summed up. The door of opportunity is shut. As the tree falls, so it must lie. No agony of alarm can alter destiny straight off. Religion is not a matter of magic. This is not to deny that, so long as life lasts, the willing and receptive mind, which is faith, can do wonders; and that the good things of the Spirit are always to be had, without money and without price. But to the individual, with his limited career, the door cannot be open for ever; and if he be found eventually on the wrong side of it, he has penalised himself. Meanwhile, by the mercy of God, opportunity continues; the day of our departure, at least to our seeing, being not fixed, although always a possibility

in the foreground. Not that we are meant to peer into the future, and have morbid thoughts about death. The virgins who were wise could slumber and sleep, yet be prepared, when the hour came, to meet their Lord. We can live continually under the power of the eternal, while not directly thinking of our latter end. Our lives may be so ordered in integrity and unselfishness, so transferred already (so to speak) to things which death cannot touch, that when called upon to encounter dissolution, we do so, not only without dismay, but with Christian equanimity. Death is no more a terror to our waiting souls, than sleep is to our wearied bodies. For ourselves as individuals, we know neither the day nor the hour, but as beings called to show interest in the cause of man as man, we know that the great Kingdom—with which, more than with aught else, we feel identified at our best—shall persist, and go on in its victorious and never-dying course. The round of business—arena of God's high purpose—will proceed: the workshops resound with labour, the miners go down into the pit, the vessels descend the winding river and wend their way upon the wide sea. But other hands than ours will hold the plough, or ply the loom, or be busy over household cares. Other eyes will gaze on sea and sky, on wood and river, and the beauty of the distant hill. "Whatsoever therefore thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy

might." Life-results are being fixed, and cannot alter in the twinkling of an eye. Holiness and the Holy Spirit, is the one thing needful. What the Master said to the disciples, He saith unto us: "Watch."

XXI

THE SOWER

“Hearken : Behold, the sower went forth to sow : and it came to pass, as he sowed, some seed fell by the way side, and the birds came and devoured it. And other fell on the rocky ground, where it had not much earth ; and straightway it sprang up, because it had no deepness of earth : and when the sun was risen, it was scorched ; and because it had no root, it withered away. And other fell among the thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit. And others fell into the good ground, and yielded fruit, growing up and increasing ; and brought forth, thirtyfold, and sixtyfold, and a hundredfold. And he said, Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.”—MARK iv. 3-9 (R.V.).

THE crowd was great. From cities of the plain, from hamlets on the hill, the “multitude” came thronging to His presence. Seated at first by the seaside, the Speaker soon felt that the pressure was embarrassing, and the simple expedient was adopted of launching out a little to the deep. A boat, swinging easy from the shore, became His pulpit, and picturesquely seated in it He discoursed to thousands ranged in listening attitudes upon the beach. We feel already that this is a parable remarkable for the impressionist

power of its pictures. No wonder it caught our earliest fancy, and claims a premier place still. There it floats, calm upon the stream of memory, like the vessel on which Jesus was seated as He spoke, swaying gently upon the surface of the tide.

What a sea of faces, varied in expression, must have met His gaze! But Jesus had a message for them all. He looked beyond them to the great face of Nature, and saw varying features in that wondrous realm also. Here is tribute to His marvellous powers as preacher. He straightway blends the two worlds into one, and appeals to analogy. The key to the reading of His story is—Look on this picture and on that.¹

Interest increases as we learn from Palestinian travellers that there is many a patch of country beside the Galilean Lake which resembles the description. Bluff headlands are a striking feature, and between these, grassy slopes and cultivated portions are pleasantly discovered. Amid the undulating stretches

¹ It is a sound instinct that keeps the Sower specially popular. Not only does it bring out markedly the genius of the appeal to Nature, and the extraordinarily rapid yet concise fancy of the pictures, but the boat incident carries with it the historicity of the widespread enthusiasm which Jesus evoked in Galilee; while the interpretation reveals Him as a Teacher under no illusions with His audience—rather the calm Seer, looking past discouragements to a great Future.

of corn, there are stony knolls, and clumps of thorn spring up among the waving grain; while down the zigzag path, you see the sower in his season coming from the village. The onlooker from the lake is charmed by the varied prospect: from broken hills down to mead and cornland, the whole fringed by a shelving shore, where wavelets play among the pebbles and make a lapping sound.¹

Jesus gazed upon that scene, felt it was emblematic of the hour, and straightway invested it with deep significance. "Hearken," He cried, the voice being raised to catch the attention of the multitude. "Behold, the sower went forth to sow." Buoyant of step, as becomes the spirit of the reviving year, he moves at measured pace among the furrows, and casts with open hand the grain abroad. A bridle-path runs across the field, which is unfenced, and seed falls upon the beaten track. With no covering earth at hand, it cannot germinate; and the birds, which hover always near the husbandman, pounce upon the spot and carry off their prize.

And some fell on soil that lay thin upon the limestone rock. Growth followed in due course: nay, it was specially striking, for ground is warm where you

¹ The magnificent descriptions of Mr. Robert Hichens must have helped many to realise how the face of Nature in Palestine, which has evidently a beauty all its own, touched the soul of Jesus, especially in spring. "Galilee is all beauty—touching, exquisite beauty."

have a rocky formation underneath and no great depth of earth above. But moisture, for the same reason, tended to be insufficient; and when the sun was up, the seedling got scorched—"because it had no root, it withered away."

And some fell among thorns. The soil was right enough, but there were farmers' pests—rootlets lurking in the ground—and once again disaster dashed in upon success. The thorns were in their native element, and sprang up more quickly than the seed. The latter, outgrown and overtopped, was denied the necessary light and air—it was literally choked.

Are obstacles, then, to baffle everywhere the good seed of the sower, so strong to labour, so sanguine at his task? The first had come to nothing; the second showed the hopeful leaf; the third struggled to the stalk; but failure overtook all in the end, judged by the great test of Jesus—they yielded no fruit. Nay, for these are but incidents—shadings in the picture—and the fate of the main body of the crop remains to be described. The hand of Providence is sure, and seed-time and harvest shall not fail. There are breadths of rich soil, fitly purged and prepared. Not hard and sodden, like the first; not thin and sapless, like the second; not foul and noxious, like the third. Cast into such ground, nurtured by the God of seasons, the seed of the sower sprang up, grew, and fructified.

It waved before his eyes in beauty in the time of harvest, and as he carried home his sheaves rejoicing, he felt that all his arduous doings were repaid. The Eastern image runs the description up enthusiastically to a hundredfold, *i.e.* it was a splendid crop.

The broad result, therefore, was encouraging. Nature does things with a lavish hand. What a blaze of blossom in the spring, much of which never ends in fruit! So of the sower's seed, which at many a point was lost or came to nothing, the mass of it succeeded—in fact, was marvellously multiplied. He who goes on, therefore, with dauntless zeal, has ample consolation in the end. Nay, consolation is hardly the word; there is such solid success upon the whole, that he is richly gratified. The wise husbandman allows for partial failure here and there. He discounts obstacles, and keeps his eye upon the main chance. He gives the vogue to faith and hope, and year by year, when results are garnered, he finds that he has his reward.

The whole story bespeaks, clearly, a certain experience on the part of Jesus. Checks and reverses, as a sower of good seed among men, He had known. But these He puts in true perspective; He does not pile them in panic in the foreground, where they would obscure the gaze. Rather there is strong within Him the faith that in the main, and in the

long-run, all is well. As regards that audience before Him, for instance, He had no mistaken views. To a sad extent, He was looking into eyes that did not see, speaking into ears that did not hear. Many were idle and indifferent, drawn by a fashionable rage to listen to this youthful prophet of the day. Their receptivity, as they stood, was practically *nil*. Others had some insight, but were shallow and frivolous, too thoughtless to lay the word sincerely to heart. More were case-hardened: deadened down to unconcern about the life that is eternal; their better nature, in one way or another, drawn away to the world and enticed. And yet, when all these were allowed for, a great mass remained from whom better things might be expected, and in whom real good was to be reaped. Ripe graces of character should yet be richly exhibited by many a humble and truly trusting soul. Jesus is a Teacher who is not depressed by difficulties and drawbacks; even passing failure has a place in the providence of God. He is the sanguine prophet, the quiet hero, the strong and hopeful Sower, who keeps above all and before all in His mind the vision of a sure and ample harvest in the future. For those who think too exclusively of Jesus as a Man of Sorrows, and incline to be morbid in religious views, there is no better tonic than the Sower.

But if this be the point of the parable originally,

it is to be remembered that the Church early came to reverence these sayings of the Master's in the letter, and to treat them as mysteries to be unlocked with keys. Obscurity gathered round the occasion of their utterance, even the original line of the somewhat enigmatical argument got obscured, and special meanings were sought in the details of the narrative. The allegorical method, in short, arose, with the result that reflective comments—not without their own use and value—were given to the faithful, thus overlaying somewhat the first practical purpose in view.¹ In the case of this parable of the Sower, the different kinds of soil were elaborately treated as representative of different classes of character. Hence the interpretation which has come down to us, linked with the story, in all the Synoptic Gospels.

First, the wayside hearers—those that hear, but

¹ This is important in Gospel study, it gives such clear evidence of a certain mental tendency on the part of teachers who followed immediately on Jesus, and addressed the weekly meetings. It occurs to me to add, that they must have been greatly influenced by the model of the parabolic method, and in speaking to their themes may unconsciously have handled the oral tradition at times with a little freedom, in the interest of preaching effect. The various theses, we may be confident, ring back true to Jesus; but we may not be quite so sure regarding the mechanism employed in support. To take an instance, few will doubt the verisimilitude of the tree-incident at Jericho; but is not the true method of interpretation this, that we see the great moral or principle the author of the paragraph had in view, and then admire the edifying way in which he brings it out, and drives it home? I ventilate the notion for what it may be worth.

understand not. And why? Because their hearts are unstirred by emotion, hardened like the trodden path; not the free and rich soil self-culture might have made them. Some day they may be harrowed by affliction and adversity, but meanwhile spiritual appeals seem thrown away upon them. To the childlike faith of early ages, the powers of evil are winged spirits, flitting about, and resisting the purposes of God. These, in such cases, are like the birds, hovering about, and snatch away the word from men's hearts.

Next, the stony-ground believers, receiving the word with gladness, but afterwards falling away. They are impulsive, but unstable. Religion is too exclusively a sentimental excitement; an arguing of themselves into the belief that they are saved. Time, and the practical tests of time, reveal the rock beneath; in particular, the Christian claim for the carrying of the Cross shows their piety to be superficial. "When tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, straightway they stumble" (ver. 17). This class may have been far from uncommon in the Early Church. Converts were apt to become perverts, when they realised the bitter hardships entailed, and saw the ominous figure of the informer appearing in the wake.

But if these be the half-hearted, as the former were the hard-hearted, there is yet a third class, whom we

may style the double-hearted. The soil is deeper, but vexed with competing plants. In the Early Church, no doubt, there were subtle anti-Christian influences arising in connection with civil employments; and there were the enticements and exactions of pagan society, just as among ourselves in similar forms, the cares of the material life, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the thought of other objects of desire, choke the word and render it unfruitful. Here is the history of many a fallen spirit. In this way or in that, the things of the Spirit get neglected, and power of sacrifice is atrophied. The slightest feeling of a cross upon the shoulder is intolerable. The yoke is not easy, the burden anything but light. The grand ideal of being happy in the happiness of others, is gone. We saw it once in glory on the far horizon, but the chilling frost came down when it was toward evening, and the vision sank behind the darksome hill. Bit by bit, the direct interests of the higher life are forgotten, and the good seed is hopelessly entangled. It is checked, and stunted, and choked, and it brings no fruit to perfection.

Last and only noble class, those that accept humbly and open-mindedly the truth, cherish it, as if in a congenial soil, and remain steadfast till it matures in finished graces of character. They have not dull ears and dead consciences like the first, nor transient

emotions and weak wills like the second, nor are they ensnared and enslaved by the world, like the third. What a joy to every lover of the holy to see the earliest stage, the tender blade of piety, springing up so fair and free; sweet, too, the dewdrops of refreshing grace, at the dawning of their day. And then the gladness of the final harvest scene; the fruits of the Spirit garnered, as on a sunlit plain—some thirty, some sixty, and some an hundredfold.

The secret, we are told, is an honest and good heart. Be single-minded, therefore, earnest in your attitude to truth, by whatever channel it may come. Show the dauntless, the direct, the strenuous devotion of a Luther or a Paul. Learn much, learn everything, from the Author of the tale Himself. Who so patient as the Master-Sower: so quietly heroic, so sublimely persevering in the face of thick discouragements? Be not depressed by seeming absence, long slowness, of results. Have the zealous mind, the sacrificing spirit. God is over all. In due season we shall reap, if we faint not. How sad the first instance, that as folk get older, they seem sometimes to be harder: aliens to generosity and continuing tenderness of feeling. How poor the cynic of the second case, shrivelled from want of depth of nature. How despicable the openly confessed worldling of the third class, corrupted by his thorny cares, deceived by the riches and the

pleasures of the outward life. The Gospel recipe is strong and simple faith. Cleave ye to the time-worn, venerable motto: "Having heard the word, hold it fast, and bring forth fruit with patience" (Luke viii. 15).

XXII

THE SEED GROWING SECRETLY

“So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should cast seed upon the earth ; and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should spring up and grow, he knoweth not how. The earth beareth fruit of herself ; first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. But when the fruit is ripe, straightway he putteth forth the sickle, because the harvest is come.”—MARK iv. 26-29 (R.V.).

THE chief seasons of the year, in the farming world, are seed-time and harvest, and between these two, so far at least as cornfields are concerned, the husbandman is practically unemployed. Be he never so anxious to see the crops ripened, he is helpless to affect the issue. But there are at work, meanwhile, beneficent forces which carry to maturity the desired process of fruit-bearing. It is an affair of germ in the seed, sap in the soil, action in the atmosphere. The power of God is everything. Man knows from experience, that as he waits upon the course of Nature, all is well ; for “the earth beareth fruit of herself.”

So, Jesus teaches, of the seed of spiritual truth. It has a faculty of assimilation, a capacity for increase,

which ends duly in reproduction and expansion. Dead things never grow; but here is a principle of life, so surrounded by conditions, that it leads to indefinite diffusion, with the most happy results. No doubt the sower in the spiritual, as in the material world, has to bestir himself, but the following growth is on the lines of unseen laws, working in society independently of himself. His mood is one of faith and hope, as well as active zeal; and as God's kingdom develops, there is a harvest, which will show his hope is not betrayed. We have really two duties in the matter, the one complementary to the other. The individual must play his part, and play it well; but he must also betimes "stand still and see the salvation of God." Jesus felt and said, as well for others as for Himself, that good seed being sown, the ripening is in higher hands. He points to an over-ruling providence, and by glimpses at the face of Nature indicates how surely, if silently, a noble evolution proceeds—"first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear."

The narrative is finely pictured, fresh and buoyant, as we bethink us of the pleasant hours of spring.¹ The sower is in the fields, casting with judicious care his seed upon the ground. The harrow follows in the wake, gliding through the brown earth; the sun sinks

¹ Not that the Palestinian seed-time is the same as ours, but for Western minds we must describe by parallels,

in the west, and the day is done. The sower sleeps and rises, and turns to other tasks. Boon Nature, however, never rests; for while we mortals are asleep, plants are springing up. By night and by day, in storm and in calm, the growth is going on, watered by the rain, nourished by the soil, blest with the sun's heat, refreshed by the dew. And all we know not how—some mysterious potency of life which the most learned cannot ultimately analyse. Science stands baffled at the bridge between dead particles and vegetable organisms. The vision of a wheatfield in particular, or of the barley harvest, rises before the speaker's eye, and as if from the brush of an impressionist artist, the wondrous procession of the seasons breaks upon our view.

“First the blade.” Who loves not the first prophetic tints of verdure, as the earth revives? The early hues upon the grass, the putting forth of tender leaves upon the trees, the bursting buds on bush and brake, and, above all, what is here specially referred to, the bright vision of the first shoots of corn (the “braird”), so fair and lustrous, and so profoundly full of hope.

“Then the ear.” Who joys not in the genial summer-time? The glory of the green sward, the gay carpeting of flowers, the woodlands sporting in the breeze their leafy pride. And, above all, what is here specially referred to, the growing crops upon the fruitful fields—

the grain becoming tall upon the stalk, shooting spear-like heads into the air of heaven.

“Then the full corn in the ear.” Whose heart does not mellow amid autumnal scenes? The fruit where formerly were flowers, the pensive notes of colour, the berries bright upon the wild-wood thicket, the mature treasures of the orchard, and, above all, what is here specially referred to, the golden grain, drooping in humble grace its heavy-laden head (“full corn in the ear”), swaying with fine breadth in the breeze, and growing daily to the ripened tint which is sure token that the time of harvest is at hand.

Meanwhile the honest farmer puzzles not about the philosophy of things. His is the passive attitude, the easy mind, as of one who has done his part, and waits on others. The earth, he knows, has taken charge of the seed: that earth which so wonderfully yieldeth fruit of herself, evolving by measured stages of progression the good things which are his heart's desire. And eventual facts confirm, for “when the fruit alloweth”—this final fact being mentioned merely as vindication of his faith—“straightway he putteth forth the sickle, because the harvest is come.” God, with gracious power, hath not left unblest his early labours on the land; as all can see, now that once more in the rolling year the season of in-gathering has come round. The picture is idyllic, ending with the

reaper in the fields, while joy is over all. One feels thankful for its rescue in the Second Gospel, where alone the parable is found, like a floweret in a lonely dell.¹

The parable is exceedingly suggestive. For the immediate hearers of Jesus it was especially informing, seeing they expected great things shortly to appear—broad and notable results in the outward realm. The common people looked for revival of the ancient glories of Israel. Their leaders were political in method. Zealots in the ranks of Jesus Himself were asking: “Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” And so, in His gentle way, He insinuates through the picture a more spiritual view. Harvest belongs to the future, and is not at our commanding. Yet rich and joyful it shall be, however seemingly delayed, and slow-coming the while. Of tangible results, little as yet could be pointed out; this every candid observer must admit. The seed had been sown—nothing more. But remember Nature, and the appointed order of the Universe. They could afford to wait, like the husbandman, for there was an innate power in the seed, and a kindly providence around, which forbade that it should perish. Faith, Hope, Patience—trust in the One supreme Power—

¹ Some identify it, I am aware, with the story of the Tares, but I am not convinced.

these were the Gospel watchwords of the moment. The earth beareth fruit of herself. The Harvest should come. It is in passages like this that we feel the infinite calm reigning in the Master's heart.

The principle unfolded has many applications, and one does not wonder that Evolution, as an idea, has taken possession of the modern mind. How interesting, in that connection, to see the name of Jesus appearing in the most familiar of our latest modes of thought! Very precarious at the beginning was the Christian situation. A seedling planted, little more. Only the first sproutings—a few spring tokens—met the bodily eye of Jesus, though with the eye of faith He saw the full-orbed glories of the Kingdom that had been initiated by His sacrificing ministry of love. A gospel preached here and there, a few half-enlightened followers throughout the land—that was all, as yet. First the blade. In virtue of inherent vitality, however, it should increase secretly with the increase of God. Then the ear. But not without fluctuations. Church history with its ups and downs, its chequered chronicle of glorious triumphs and inglorious defeats, its ebb and flow of reformations and revivals, its onward march of progress on the whole, can tell us of a tale that illustrates the truth. But oh, the final harvest that must come, on principles of which every husbandman knows—after that the full corn in the ear.

The successors of Jesus had to be taught the lesson sternly. The growth of the Church could only be gradual, after the manner of the seed in the similitude. Trial and persecution quickly came to chasten all their expectations. Away with futile notions of a speedily triumphant cause. Martyrdom might be their doom. But though the workman ceased from labour and slept the sleep of death, the work itself should go on. The Word of God was the plant, which liveth and abideth for ever. And so growth and ripening should proceed, till the destined Harvest should arrive—"first the blade, then the ear, after that the full corn in the ear."

Lastly, there is the relation of the principle to individual character. Life, ideally, is a development from the cradle to the grave. Bud, blossom, fruit—each in Nature has specific charm. So of childhood, youth, and manly prime; each should exhibit the appropriate attributes. The old, laden with rich fruits of the Spirit, should be gathered to the grave in peace, like as a shock of corn cometh in his season. But human nature is not of wood—you cannot cut it rigorously into lengths. Some very quickly show traces of the stunted and neglected—debasement being often traceable to heredity and to environment. Others, young in years, are well advanced in grace. The rule for all is, to improve the experience that

comes their way ; to gather wisdom from the discipline of life, that so a holier spirit may steal across their hearts. It is clear lesson from the parable that there is something not ourselves—an unseen and almighty Power—which is the mainspring of the Universe. There is the one Supreme Spirit—Spirit of love and holiness and of eternal life—whom we feel in our best moments to be the secret of what we are, the faith by which we grow, the hope of what we yet shall be. “He giveth power to the faint, and to them that have no might he increaseth strength.” “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength ; they shall mount up with wings as eagles ; they shall run, and not be weary ; they shall walk, and not faint.”

XXIII

THE MUSTARD SEED

“Unto what is the kingdom of God like? and whereunto shall I liken it? It is like unto a grain of mustard seed, which a man took, and cast into his own garden; and it grew, and became a tree; and the birds of the heaven lodged in the branches thereof.”—LUKE xiii. 18, 19 (R.V.).

WHAT is nobler in the landscape than a tree, with its stately stem towering to the sky, its broad brow fanned by the cooling breeze, its long and strong limbs on which the boys play, its deep and leafy shade, under which the cattle stand? Yet once it was of feeble growth. Of a certain size, no doubt, when planted there as a sapling; but earlier still it was a tiny seed. For real significance in the contrast, we must go in fancy to the sprouting of the germ. Look at the oak, champion of the forest, and think of the puny acorn from which it sprang. A lover of trees selected carefully the nut, and planted it at some choice spot, to ornament his manor. And the reward is clear. The stranger stands still in admiration,

gazing at its huge proportions. The acorn in those early days might have been lightly passed by ; a mere morsel to be crunched by the beasts of the field. But there was latent in it power from the great Fount of Life, and the sweet influence of the seasons was assured. Growth, even to marvel, has been the result. Now it is the paragon of the park, the wonder of the countryside.

So of the Gospel of God, as taught by Jesus Christ. Notable and beneficent success was to crown a kingdom, which had been humble, even paltry, in its beginnings. The seedling of divine truth should become the spreading tree ; the little social movement, an empire among men. Let none deride, therefore, the initial weakness, the outward insignificance of His cause. God was in it and around it, and it should go on from strength to strength. Yea, the world should yet be astonished at the vastness of result, and rejoice greatly in the rich and quiet blessings thereof.

For absolute size, it was the cedar that was the peerless emblem of majestic strength. A goodly specimen, to the eye of prophet and of psalmist, was token of right royal power. But of comparative greatness, greatness in the light of its own origin, the aptest emblem was the mustard plant. It was proverbially least among seeds—the smallest, at any

rate, which a gardener ordinarily sowed. But look at it midway through the season, and the development is amazing, with its strong woody fibre and wide-branching sprays. It overtops the other garden herbs, and is a perfect Titan among its fellows; something that fills the eye, and casts a pleasing shade.

The Arabs cultivate it specifically, we know, for purposes of condiment; and we are bidden think of a certain man taking seed and sowing it. Not broadcast, however, and by the handful; but selecting a particular "grain," and going to a special place in "his own garden" (Luke) and dropping it with care into the prepared bed. Result, it grew, and became a "tree"; the purpose of that last word being to bring out the relative bigness of the product. On the one hand, as a seed, exceedingly minute: a speck that might be blown away by a breath of wind, something too trivial to turn the scale in a balance. And on the other, a monster-growth which is sometimes ten feet high. A man on horseback in the Jordan valley might find it grazing his face. And as tribute to the situation, notice the touch from animated nature—the fowls of the air lodge in the branches thereof. These birds, when it was a grain, might not have paused to pick it up. But how changed the scene, when it has become the leading feature of the place.

They fly to it for shelter and rest, and can be seen fluttering amid the yellow gilding of its flowers—revelling also, no doubt, in due season on its multitude of fruit-seeds.¹

Opponents might flout the teaching of the Master—and more and more they were doing so—but Jesus knew it was a seed of spiritual truth which He was planting, and one which God His Father would bless. In other words, there was a forward character about His message, which in the end would justify itself. Nowhere do we see Him calmer in self-respect, fuller of the inborn devotion which spells dignity in a moral cause. Strong believers ever are prophetic; though the present seems surly towards them, they feel the future is theirs. This little plant of His, He affirms, was assured of the privileged favour of God, whose own Kingdom was the issue at stake—a spiritual reign of the holy everywhere, for which the ages waited. Yet a little while, and it would rear its humble head above the parent earth, and finally surprise the on-looker by its dimensions. How different was the system of His pharisaic critics, which the Heavenly Father, He declared, had not planted, and which

¹ Dan. iv. 12 and Ezek. xvii. 23 indicate that the Hebrew image included food as well as shelter, refreshment as well as rest. Rich and quiet, and truly satisfying joy, seems the idea. The writer has treated this and some other parables in Dr. Hastings' *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*.

would be rooted up in the time of harvest. These exponents of tradition were contemptuous in their treatment of Himself, and no doubt to the average gaze His movement was but a pining plant. Destined in reality, He knows and says, to be glorious in growth : the weak, the lowly, the despised, to be transfigured in days to come, into the honoured, the exalted, the strong. Not that we are to think of Jesus as the self-conscious Seer, who peers into an ambitious future ; His rather is the hold on truth, the confidence in One who shields it from harm, which makes faith boundless and hope assured. This was the tree of ancient prophecy, that sends out her boughs unto the sea, her branches to the river, and that fills the land : benign source of shelter and refreshing unto many, even to those who as yet are very far off.

History, we now see, has set to its seal, and confirmed the aptness of the image. Appearances were dead against Him at the moment, but the instinct of the speaker was supreme. There was He, the humble Galilean, in whom was hid the heavenly germ ; brought up in a despised province, and in a town out of which, it was said, a good thing could not come ; living in remote obscurity till manhood ; then a teacher among the scattered villages, albeit without approval of the orthodox ; an outcast of society more or less, and exposed to contumely and want ; with only a few

believing followers, and these uninfluential and little educated; Himself dying a humiliating and miserable death, the scorn of all the powers that were, ecclesiastical and civil; a malefactor, meeting the hateful end of a criminal upon the Cross. Surely to the eye of flesh the whole affair was trivial, a religious movement that had ended in fiasco. Not thus, the cynics would cry out, does commanding greatness arise. What, forsooth, could be more unlike the founding of a mighty kingdom than that?

Yes, but mark nevertheless the real greatness that was to spring from that unpromising commencement: the stately Gospel-tree growing from the puny Word-seed. While men ridiculed the notion that one so tame in spirit could be the leader of a reformation; while some knelt in derision, and paid Him mock honours as a king, and others pointed to His ignominious end as the finale of a delusion or an imposture; while the world at large forgot quickly His strange career and stranger claims: all this while His spiritual sovereignty was being gradually established among men—the growth from the indestructible seed becoming organic, and the Christian brotherhood an aggregate exceptionally great in proportion to its origin. Even before He was hurried by the Roman soldiers to a despicable death, His communion had gained a visible position. There was a handful of the faithful around Him, whom

He could assure it was the Father's good pleasure to give them the Kingdom. And when the vital power of the Spirit that was in Him began to spread after His cruel death, the Church became the little tree that was taking root: a plant, as in the storied garden, that raised its modest head among the other herbs. Think of the little company, the one hundred and twenty, in the Upper Room. Think, later and greater, of the thousands added in the days of Pentecost. Think, later and greater still, of the growth at Antioch, where the communion became such as to need a name. Think of the wide wanderings, the large ingatherings, of St. Paul. And so, on and on, through later ages, in successes of which time would fail one to tell; until now, in our day, the Church of Christ, the Kingdom preached by the lowly Galilean, has waxed a mighty tree, although it has not yet, in the figure of the prophet, reached even to the heavens, and cast its shadow over all the land. The axe of judgment has been laid at the root of many another monarch of the woods. Countless earthly kingdoms, originating unlike His in pomp and pride, have crumbled in the course of centuries, and gone down to inglorious decay. But the Gospel Kingdom, increasing continually in its life and work, is moving onwards to a glorious consummation. Countless are now its green leaves, its tender buds of promise; innumerable the branches of social

movement and missionary effort, springing from the parent stem ; manifold the ripe fruits, in the shape of saintly lives, dropping in the time of harvest into the garner of God. Multitudes are fleeing to the Kingdom, like the birds, seeking satisfaction and shelter for their weak and weary souls. There behold the aged Christian sitting grateful beneath its shade. Listen to the young disciples, joyous as children sporting around the chestnut on the village green. Not that in the complete sense we see the King in his beauty and the Kingdom's power. But there are glimpses of its grandeur, even broad and brilliant flashes at times. We have visions, like the rapt seer, of the Tree of Life, bearing precious fruit beside the crystal waters, and whose leaves are for the healing of the nations.

How thankful should we be, that living in this latest century we enjoy the fostering protection and soothing shadow of the Church, now in part triumphant as a Kingdom, and with its small beginning left far behind. As the heirs of a Christian civilisation, however many fail to admit it, we are all favoured by its benign influence ; sitting beneath our vine and our fig-tree, with none to make us afraid. Individually also, the principle of progress can apply. For grace in each of us at first is but the grain of seed ; and ours should be the anxious care that it may grow through sunshine and through storm to be a goodly tree. All life is

from one supreme source, and the allied emblem comes in, that as living branches we must abide in the Vine. Nay more, we have ourselves, like Christ, to drop grains of truth into the souls of others. There are little words and little deeds, which daily, like little seeds, can start a vitalising process. Yet much we leave, as all this class of illustration suggests, to the ways of God's providence and to the workings of His Spirit. We know not in what subtle fashion germs grow to larger life; how seeds pass from bud to flower, from flower to perfect fruit. But one thing is certain. In thus working, we are furthering alike the growth of the great Kingdom and the resources of our own souls. We are going on, like the race at large, from one degree of perfection unto another. The ideal of Jesus is more and more being realised in us, and we are deepened in the spiritual life hid with Him in God, "till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

XXIV

THE LEAVEN

“Whereunto shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like unto leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened.”—LUKE xiii. 20, 21 (R.V.).

THE daily bread of Palestine was baked at home, and Jesus knew from youth the kneading-trough and ovens of the village houses at Nazareth. Not a single hearer of His was unfamiliar with the process whereby the little pick of leaven, hidden in the dough, so did its quiet and out-spreading work that every table in the land had loaves. In the same manner, Jesus urges, principles make their way in the world for good or for ill. From mind to mind they pass, whether in the system of the Pharisees, which He likened to leaven, or in God's own Kingdom, instinct with a gracious and free-playing spirit. It was in humble images like this that the Master found what not merely covered the case, but proved at the same time thoroughly effective for the instruction of a popular audience. Not one, moreover, appeals more directly than does

this image to the modern mind ; it is so suggestive of Evolution.

Thanks to a latent force which did not lend itself readily to scrutiny, the Gospel rule of goodness in the soul had an extending power, which would be ample and beneficent in result. Though singularly unobtrusive to the common eye, there was yet about the movement with which Jesus identified Himself a subtle faculty fitted to transform spiritually humanity at large. However diminutive to begin with, the energising element was so fermenting and penetrative that in due season mankind would be assimilated—their minds changed, their hearts subdued, their wills moulded : all society regenerated by a new spirit : the Kingdom triumphant at last which had been the theme of psalmist and of prophet : diffusion following infusion to such an astonishing extent, that there was resetting of the old saying, “ A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.”

A woman we are bidden think of : she being the person in the Jewish home to whom the duty fell. And the quantity, three measures of meal—so many pecks of flour—as the ordinary household batch. The leaven, a little of the old fermented dough, put into the new, like our barm, for the opening up of the substance to the action of fire. And as a special detail, the “hiding” of this leaven ; for we are not to

think it carelessly added, and lightly thrown from the hand, but "taken" by the woman and deliberately mixed into the mass—put where it will be covered, and then left to diffuse equally towards the circumference. Given a certain high temperature, which is presumed in the story, and allowing for due lapse of time, we can be well assured of the whole being leavened. The loaves will rise, and the household be fitly furnished with bread.

"The kingdom of God cometh not with observation . . . lo, the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke xvii. 20, 21), is the detached saying of Jesus that occurs to one here. It is a sovereignty of God in the soul, hiddenly advanced—quiet, yet potent, broadly manifest in rich result in the long-run. This is the essential point of the parable: religion being exhibited as a spiritual power working from a centre, and so permeating in an unceasing way, that to its glorious likeness humanity is finally transformed. Truly an elevated ideal. How meek and mild in method; at once persuasive and pervasive. Nothing here of the hard externalism that meets us at so many points in the evangelic tradition; no expectation of temporal glory on the lines of a Davidic dynasty revived; no exclusive nationalism of ecclesiastical leaders; no earthly cataclysm; no fantasy of Messiah coming with the clouds of heaven.

For us who look back from the situation of to-day, the teaching is singularly impressive. We see certain high principles of faith, informed by the teaching of the Master, vivified by His personal example, and charged with the momentum of His surviving Spirit—these principles we see ever going on, in the centuries that have succeeded, to exercise their influence ; penetrating, raising, warming, giving a sweet savour to the many among whom He moves. Causing betimes what seems a ferment, but withal genial in effect ; bestowing graces in the development which are full of virtue, tasteful, and nourishing. A thousand and one agencies inspired by Jesus are seen at work in the retrospect : every man and movement prompted by the Holy Spirit ; mixed and mixing in humanity at large, as the mass to be moved, the lump to be leavened, the world to be sanctified.

And there does seem to be a certain emphasis intended, as we saw from the mechanism of the tale, on the implication that the leaven was not there normally. It is an imparted power : taken from a special source, and mingled by the hand of mercy where it can prove an influence fitted to renew. Grace may be in us, but not of us. No wisdom of the schools, no science of select minds, but something in the air for all, penetrating like scattered perfume, easily understood and appreciated by the common people's heart,

The world to which the imparting came was cold and lifeless: stale, flat, and unprofitable. But simply, and under little notice, the benign influence began, which was to prove a savour of life unto life. In the Roman Empire, under influences like that of Paul, signs were soon seen that wholesome virtue was supplanting its disgraceful morality: disheartened philosophies yielded to sweetness and light; insipid society ran an alterative course into the strength, the richness, and the beauty of the world that was to come. This is the everlasting memorial of the great thinkings of Jesus, whose mortal eye saw but the beginning. Here was an inspiring life, fixed in the heart of Humanity, unseen yet unceasing in its work, and destined on all hands to extend—an inner Spirit that shall surely change for the best every code and custom and organisation of society. He shall not stay that mighty and mysterious influence, till the whole be leavened.

Although the word “little” is not used in either version of the parable, the hid-ness of the agent employed, and the wholeness of the leavened result, are so obvious that we cannot escape the feeling of striking contrast between the breadth of final effect and the initial obscurity and unobtrusiveness of the process. Hence, no doubt, the close association of the Mustard and the Leaven by the Evangelist. However remote from the thought of Jesus Himself in this passage, the

remembrance rises strong among His readers that in the measured judgment of His own times He was outcast and unesteemed. Think of the short, sad story of His life—one rejected and despised of men. Think of Him in the methods of His work—with no pomp of circumstance, and never the faintest appeal to force. He was no superior person; He was one who did not strive nor cry. Yet silently His Kingdom was to extend. His doctrine dropped as the dew, His speech distilled like the rain; as small rain upon the tender herb, and as showers upon the grass. Or consider the case of those who spread the leaven when He died, themselves infected with His deathless spirit. Of insignificant account, also, as regards worldly influence. Simple fishermen, depreciated publicans, reclaimed harlots, journeying tent-makers. Commonplace their position, and unambitious their ways: who would weigh them in the balance with the wise and prudent? Yet the word uttered from such feeble lips was to have free course and to be glorified. The Kingdom reflected in their humble lives was to go on in a victorious career, conquering and to conquer. Judaism, venerably rooted in tradition, was to droop its head before the new influence. Paganism, in its panoply of pride, was to be driven from the field. The religion of the crucified Galilean, unheeded by the historians of the day, and in the persons of its professors an object of contempt

and cruelty, was to become the greatest power in the universe; to add a crown to mighty monarchs, and to ennoble the degraded and despairing in all lands. *Sic itur ad astra* might be its motto, in the light of its own annals.

Not that the ideal is completely realised. Persistent though the influence has been, and persuasive the methods, the Gospel is far from permeating every part and parcel of the globe. Reforming and missionary movements, therefore, must extend until the whole be leavened. If the race is to be transfigured, no part of the life of any nation, obviously, is to escape the electrifying touch. Not with disorder, and convulsion of the strata of society, but by moral suasion, by sweet reasonableness, by mild movement like the hid leaven. Heathen practices, and conventions among ourselves not yet recognised as heathen, are to be undermined, and the subtle evils of civilisation put to shame. Christian opinion, the irresistible influence of the Spirit of Jesus, is to reinforce everywhere the things that make for righteousness. Slavery, war, drunkenness, debauchery, the selfishness of Capital, the tyranny of crude Majorities—everything that counteracts the higher harmonies of God—are one and all to be held in abhorrence, and finally banished before the breath of Christ. The wilderness and the solitary place are to be gladdened; the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as

the rose. Such, in Christ Jesus, is the hope of man; the sustained and sustaining expectation of the race; the ideal of the world to come.

Nor must the individual be forgotten, in whose heart the Gospel-leaven is to be hid. Day by day, let his inner nature be more and more subdued to goodness, fired to love and holiness, as by a live coal from off the altar of God. Heat, in virtue of eternal law, tends to diffuse equally; and water spreads, when mingled with what is dry. Leaven itself is nothing if not spreading; and it vitally affects the character of that which is around. It stirs and expands; it brings out latent combinations; it gives tone, quality, and pith. So of the large and kindly spirit of that Gospel which Jesus taught, and bled and died for. It should spread within the soul continuously, working vital changes as it spreads. We should become new creatures in Christ. And when we are truly leavened ourselves, we are as leaven unto others. In the home and on the highway, in business and in our walk and conversation in the world, we are mingled among our fellows, and so extend the invigorating power. Here comes in the test once more—the strongly practical, the humanitarian test—that Jesus loved. Are we pure and peaceable in spirit, elevated in our thoughts, manly and generous in deed? Have we caught the healthy infection of the Christian faith? It is force of character that tells; and day by

day we are exerting a viewless influence around us, that counts for Christ or for the adversary. Be true in all things to your better self. Live at all times for the eternal—for righteousness, for goodness, for truth. Seek the holiness which alone is happiness; which is, in sooth, the Kingdom of God. So shall ye be, according to your measure of attainment, as the salt of the earth, as lights among men, as Leaven to the World.

XXV

THE TARES

“The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man that sowed good seed in his field : but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away. But when the blade sprang up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. And the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst thou not sow good seed in thy field ? whence then hath it tares ? And he said unto them, An enemy hath done this. And the servants say unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up ? But he saith, Nay ; lest haply while ye gather up the tares, ye root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest : and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them : but gather the wheat into my barn.”—MATT. xiii. 24-30 (R.V.).

MALICE, brooding over multiplying woes, becomes ingenious, and takes many forms. The farmyard well, for instance, like the pure well of truth, is sometimes choked with rubbish, by an out-going tenant. Here it was the fouling of the seed-crop. The vindictive monster had watched the ploughing of the land, and seen with envious eye the good seed cast into the furrow. Then the prowling creature,

thirsting from unvented spleen, crawled out in devil's spirit to do his devil's deed. It is in the dead of night that beasts of prey creep forth, and the sun that day had gone down upon the spitefulness of this man. As the stars above him shot down their glances, he should have bethought him of the eye of God. But no, with furtive footsteps he hurries him across the wheatfield; starting at every whisper of the wind, or baying of the distant watch-dog's voice; yet resting not till he had thrown broadcast the pernicious darnel, or bastard-wheat, which was to spring up with the true grain, and carry endless trouble in its train. And so, his dastard work accomplished, the cunning coward slunk back to his abode—"he went away."

The subtle nature of the crime was this, that the mischief was at work long before it was detected. Even when the blade appears—that marvellous vision of earth's tender beauty in the spring-time—the difference between the wild seed and the cultivated is imperceptible. The farmer might simply rub his eyes, and blame himself for having sown too thickly. But when it is heading into ear ("ragging"), the real distinction cannot but emerge. Murder will out. The servants, with observant glance, were the first to notice it, and reported the matter to their master in perplexed surprise. "Sir, didst thou not

sow good seed in thy field? Whence then hath it tares?" The farmer had his own thoughts, and scented animosity—suspecting probably the diabolical offender. But he has no evidence, and contents himself by saying vaguely, yet emphatically, "An enemy hath done this." There is shrewdness in this farmer. Some, in anger and impatience, would have ploughed the whole thing down. The less-instructed servants had a drastic remedy, to thin out instantly the tares. They forgot the rootlets of the rival plants were intertwined. The far-seeing farmer, with his true eye for profit, was not going to double a trouble big enough already. "Let both grow together," said he, "until the harvest: and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn."

This is a vivid picture, and suggests that the growth of the good and true at the centre of God's world is complicated for a time. There is a seed of the false: not planted indeed in circumstances so auspicious, but nurtured on the same general terms, and tolerated by the hand that could destroy it; yet surely overtaken by judicial severance, when it is a spent force; nay, when infinite justice prevails, consigned to an ignominious fate. Jesus, as in other parables, is looking

forward. He is sowing seed in faith, and hope, and love ; but like the wise farmer, He knows that plants do not come at once to the hoe. To modern minds, the general problem of the existence of evil is here suggested, with the pleasing answer that it is but passing obstruction. For all who cling to faith in the eternity of goodness, there is encouragement in this impression, that the seed of wickedness, later sown in time, finally takes end, though it may appear occasionally in its growth to gain triumphs. But the original reference seems to be to the teaching of the Pharisees, which Jesus declares to be a plant His heavenly Father had not planted, and one destined to be rooted out (Matt. xv. 12-14). Their hypocritical system should in due time dig its own grave, and He bids the disciples leave them alone in the meantime. Blind guidance of the blind sooner or later, He declares, reaches the pit. The more Jesus feels the present enmity of His opponents, the more He seems to steel Himself to the long view of things ; and there is something laconic, as well as philosophic, in the little sentence with which He concentrates conclusions, on the occasion referred to — "Let them alone." He is never within a thousand miles of doubting the rightness and ultimate success of His cause. At a certain stage, the two rivals in the field may seem equal, or again unequal ; but only one,

and that the right one, shall prosper at the close. The end of the other is destruction — mere tares, bound in withered bundles for the flames.

Patience, however, is required that we may await developments. Violent action would be futile, and miscellaneous uprootings spell wastefulness, disorder, and dispeace. "Let both grow together until the harvest," is the calm advice of Jesus. The thoughts of His opponents ran in an opposite direction; for the Separatist spirit was harshly in the air of Palestine. The godly in the Jewish Church were only too often haughty and exclusive. Theologians inclined to look down on the lowly and uninstructed poor. "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them," was the kind of criticism directed against the more gracious ways of this novel personality, who had appeared among them from the Galilean hills. "Come ye out, and be ye separate," was the rubric of self-conscious saints. "Stand back, I am holier than thou," cried the pharisaic, as the poor pariahs and the despised tax-gatherers passed. Jesus was strong always for the principle that the practical test of a movement is its fruits; and here He is reminding us that the writ runs, not in one sphere only, but in two. For clear showing up of the real facts, however, one must await the later season of ingathering, when results will either

justify or condemn before God. We are to judge nothing before the time. Evil, in our contact with it, has meanwhile a disciplinary use; though we may be well assured it is the fruit of a corrupt tree, and as such must meet abhorrence, and a castaway fate, in the time of harvest. Only those, on the other hand, who have sown to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. It is the attitude of humble faith to await issues on God's plan, and in God's good time.

There is a breadth about the lesson involved, which makes it practically useful still. Christianity, as a regenerating social movement, must mean development by stages, and therefore must not at any given point be expected to be perfect, and rashly handled by enthusiasts. The ideal world, although already present to the feelings of faith, is yet largely a world "to come"; and neither to-morrow nor the day after can it be realised and without alloy. None would discover this more quickly than the disciples after their Master was gone. The Church in its conflicts with the world took up impure elements, and the Christian community proved far from being, as yet, the finest of the wheat. Hopeful followers, like the servants in the story, might get depressed, in a short-sighted way, by the mixed results. The never-ending error might recur of those who thought the time of Judgment had

manifestly arrived, and this a judgment at their own hands. They failed to remember the great and solemn truth, so easily forgotten, that ages with God are nothing, and a thousand years but as one day. The vital point about the workings of the supreme disposer of events is, not that they seem slow, but that they are sure. Between expectant Spring and ripe Autumn, there falls a glowing and at times oppressive Summer. Yet sure as the wheat grew, while men slept, and that farmer dreamt perchance what noble harvest he would have, the rich reaping-time shall come; and the children of men, who so often have gone forth weeping, shall be seen returning with rejoicing, bringing their sheaves with them. Trust something to the providence of God. Look humbly to the Rock that is higher than we. Rest assured that things good, and things ill, are hasting onwards to their appropriate fates. That which is obstructive, God-opposing, is consumed; the other, freed at last from trammel, gains its goal in glory. "Verily, I say unto you," said Jesus, in His laconic mood, "they have their reward." Not at all seasons, but only at one, are fruit-values appraised. "Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather up first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn." The Baptist had grasped the same

everlasting law of retribution ; yea, may have sounded it in the listening ear of Jesus by the banks of Jordan — only his saying is less gently put : “ He will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather the wheat into his garner ; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

There is an ancient interpretation of the story that has come down to us in Matt. xiii. 37-43 ; but this is now generally regarded by scholars as later than the time of Jesus Himself. It belongs to the period when parable was passing into allegory, and questions of discipline in the Early Church were emerging. The warning in that case, from the principle unfolded by Jesus, is against rashness in the ecclesiastical sphere. In botany the tender leaf is not of itself sufficing testimony always to the species of a plant ; and so the good grain of the Gospel may be unwittingly confused with the wild oats of the world. Fruits are autumnal as a rule, and they must be a certain size before you can apply the testing process, which is taste. The Church with uninstructed zeal has tried, like the hasty servants in the tale, to root out those whom she deems intruders in the field. Discipline has not seldom been intolerant, and even run to bitter persecution. Complacent puritans of little sects, with wire-drawn isms, and thumb-rules of authority, would purify the Church of God till it had neither spot, nor

wrinkle, nor any such thing. What laceration of the roots of faith, in many a soul loyal to its Lord, they have thus wrought, while thinking they were doing God service. How many heretics, so-called, have been done to death, with faggots piled up in the flames—champions, as the result showed, in the garner of later generations, of a new and truer orthodoxy. In the eyes of Rome, the great Protestant Reformers were fit only for the fire. Saul of Tarsus, like Jesus of Nazareth before him, was torn ruthless from the native soil of truth. Even now fanatic fury, in obscurantist quarters of the Church, might be prepared to harry in some new fashion persons guilty of the horrible offence of cleaving heart and soul to new interpretations of God's Word. How just, and wise, and truly pacific and tolerant, this maxim of the Master: "Let both grow together until the harvest." The thistle that spreads itself in pride amid the standing corn, will yet be cut down when the reaper comes, and cast aside as worthless. History verifies the prescience of the parable. Evolution, not revolution, is the norm. Here and there throughout the globe, falsehood and unrighteousness seem firmly fixed; but these are destined to be undermined and overthrown. The golden age for mankind has yet to dawn. God is not a man that He should lie, and His Kingdom must come. With faith, with hope, with

strong devotion to the cause, let us wait, as well as work, for Him. The Master's Spirit is at hand, to enrich, to inform, to inflame. Society, by our service, can be brought nearer and nearer to the goal. The fate of all falsity is certain, however long delayed. Truth is great and shall prevail. Not, as now, in fitful gleams, as if from a beclouded sky, but clear and radiant, vitalising for all who in God's light see light. "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (ver. 43) — shine as do the stars, for ever and ever.

XXVI

THE DRAG-NET

“The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind : which, when it was filled, they drew up on the beach ; and they sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but the bad they cast away.”—MATT. xiii. 47, 48 (R.V.).

VALUES, with Jesus, are in terms of ethics. Even love to God is nothing, unless witnessed to by love to man. This is the practical test that is emphasised in the new similitude. When fishermen haul in the net, there is but one crucial consideration, namely, essential worth. The good fish are retained, and appreciated as such ; the bad, just because they are bad, are thrown away. Jesus loves antitheses like this. The wise with oil in their vessels, and the foolish who have it not ; those with the fair robe of holiness, and the hollow pretenders who are naked and not ashamed ; the typical Pharisee *versus* the penitent Publican ; the blatant boy, who on his own showing had zeal, yet was left behind by the tardy brother, who repented and went. The Net reminds us irresistibly of the Sheep and the Goats

(xxv. 31, etc.). The one in its interpretation (xiii. 49, 50) and the other in its general setting, may be reminiscent of days somewhat later than those in which the stories themselves were uttered. But the essential teaching of both is clearly characteristic of the teaching of the Master. Do people feed the hungry and soothe the sick, or are they neglectful of their fellows? Are they merciful or unmerciful? The final test of true religion ever must be, the Humane.¹ The absolute nature of this distinction, in fact, is the emphatic point in this story of the Net, as compared with that of the Tares, where attention lingered rather on the besetting influence of evil in the Kingdom's course through time. At the bar of the eternal Judgment, we are here told, the moral difference is vital—a great gulf fixed. There is finality in the sweep of the judicial sword: it falls sharp and severe, piercing even to the dividing of the joints and marrow. In presence of such testings, not all the "called" shall be "chosen." Some cry "Lord, Lord," but do not the Father's will; these shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. They lean complacent on the edifice of a pretentious piety, but find to their cost that their grand edifice is built upon the sand. The moral, in short, is once again put forward by the Master, that

¹ Cf. the saying attributed to Jesus: "Thou hast seen thy brother, thou hast seen God."

they alone survive God's searching ordeals who have the Gospel principle of life, and act it out from day to day.

When we turn to the word-picture, we have instant vision of the Lake of Galilee—the familiar inland sea, from whose shores Jesus often gazed upon its waters, now peaceful in the play of wavelets in the sunshine, anon breaking into foam before the swift-descending storm. Emblem of the sea of human life around Him, so restless on the surface, in whose depths He desired to generate a calm. And what more frequently recurring object was there on the lake, than the fishing-boat, with whose work so many of His immediate followers were concerned. On this the image turns—the kingdom of heaven like unto a net cast into the sea. Not the small hand-net which Simon and Andrew were using, when Jesus came upon them on a memorable day, but the huge hauling or drag-net, buoyed up to float upon the rolling wave, and leaded to sink sure and deep and search the sands: run out by sturdy fishermen with long lines, and enclosing a considerable width of water; then hauled in rapidly by others, with a hundred and one fishes in its grasp. Like the soldiers of Kitchener, driving before them with wide mesh the hapless Boers of the Transvaal, or the Persian warriors of old, who joined hand in hand and marched across the Grecian isle, these Palestinian fishers sweep

through the deep, "gathering of every kind," and draw up on the shore the glittering treasures of the lake. Thereupon a vital function follows, the examining and discriminating of the catch. The process is pictured as deliberately done: the men "sit down" in order to be critical, and we feel the specimens are handled one by one. The sole test is marketable value, and fishermen to this day are seen there going through their nets, with keen eyes for the sound and saleable, and with hands just as ready to cast aside the unseasonable and the small, or those which to a Jew are the unclean. The good, Christ tells us, are gathered into vessels, the bad are thrown away.

This crisis of scrutiny is clearly the central lesson of the tale. Goodness is the great issue, personal holiness the one thing needful. True members must show the hall-mark; and the image, like so much more in the Saviour's teaching, is in line with the Beatitudes, where description is given of the characteristics of true subjects in the Kingdom. Men are a varied multitude, but when accidents are shredded off, certain essential elements remain. Character emerges behind circumstance. And it is according as the distinctive features of godliness survive, or not, out of the crucible, that persons stand or fall before God. Those that have them are accounted "good," and shall be treasured; those that have them not are "bad," and shall be

heaved hence. Not the performance of dead works, but the living and inspiring influence of justifying faith; not the preternaturally solemn look, the unctuous phrase echoed from some conventicle of cant; not the smug orthodoxy of the glib reciter of an old-world creed, but the ever-living ethic notes of the Sermon on the Mount. The meek and lowly heart, the trusting and contrite spirit, the eye enraptured with the vision of purity, the soul hungering and thirsting after righteousness, the will that comes triumphant out of great tribulation, the nature that has learned to be merciful and peaceable and loving, and that lives by the precious fruits of the Spirit: these are the things which, when upheaval comes, cannot be shaken; the Rock of Ages, our refuge and our strength in the darksome day of visitation. Men are of every kind when they are gathered; but there are only two classes, after all, at the Great Assize, namely, the good and the bad morally. The former are cherished, as unto vessels of honour; the latter are left behind as worthless, and must perish—mere offal shrivelled in the sun.

It is in the modern world that we see most clearly the large sweep of the Gospel net, the place and power of Christianity as a universal religion being now recognised. The Judaism from which it sprang stirred the inland waters, and religions like those of Egypt and

even of Greece and Rome operated in comparatively limited channels. But the faith of Jesus Christ moves out into the wide sea. Thanks to its genius for freedom, its concern for the unfettered play of spiritual principles, it has never been inalienably identified with nostrums—with stiff ritual, with unrelenting dogma, with transient political necessities. Men have never seen in it, as in the creed of Mohammed, the gleam of swords, the flaw of earthly ambition. Rather it is viewless in its workings, and so a power of quiet good in all circumstances and all climes. It charms the heart, it permeates the life; it is ready for society at every stage, world-wide in its ken, fundamental in its search. It is indeed a great net, fitted for a wide sea.

As regards its modern working, think how the missionary has been abroad, in the largest sense of the phrase. The ministries of mercy can take a thousand forms, and are to be seen in things which are described as secular, things which the narrow stickler might reckon common and unclean. How manifold are the movements of benevolence, touching not less the bodies than the souls of men, which trace their origin to Jesus and His Spirit. Whatever be men's earthly stations, each can find some appropriate method, some individual sphere, for participation in the world-wide work. There are the fallen to raise, the sorrowful to soothe, burdens to be borne for brethren's sake, and loving

sympathy to cultivate at every turn—the sympathy which treats as alien nobody and nothing human. The fishermen in the picture could not possibly all perform the same task. Some were rowing in the boat, others were paying out the line, some again were straining the apparatus from the shore. Yet all were active and effective in appointed places. So of the crowding ranks of those who love to labour for the Kingdom's cause. Not all can hold distinctive office in the Church; but all can teach by personal example, all can show the Holy Spirit, all can live the life which shone in Jesus and is the light of men. And so His Gospel shall be known on every shore, its message wafted to the loneliest island of the sea.

The missionary note is the most distinctive mark of the modern Church, and seems to grow in volume with something of geometrical progression. It is as if the fishing-boat of the Galilean Lake had given place to the steam-trawler. The latter works not in the little bay, but goes out to sea, and gathers there of every kind, from hugest halibut or lordly salmon down to shining whiting; graceful mackerel and graceless dog-fish; vacant-staring cod, flopping flounders, bewildered and cantankerous crabs; fish of every fin, or of no fin; creatures canny and uncanny; a motley-coloured, many-kinded prize. So of the ingatherings of the Kingdom. People are there in all stages of intellectual

culture and material lot; high and low, rich and poor, young and old, learned and unlearned. And all branches of the human race—every kindred and nation and people and tongue. The savage bowing down no more to stocks and stones; the negro no longer a slave, save as the servant of Jesus Christ; and at the opposing pole, the sceptic, who finds at last that, for ethical content, the Prophet of Nazareth is most to him the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

But the lesson returns, which is the lesson of the story, that however many the classes and kinds, in the deepest sense there are but two—the good and the bad. Religion's test is individual attainment on the lines of the pronouncement of St. Peter: "God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him" (Acts x. 35). To be arithmetically in the net is not enough. Membership in the visible Church is matter of arrangement; but it is another thing to be allocated to the Kingdom when the absolute division comes. When nets are being drawn, onlookers perceive that there are fish about, and animated calculations are made; here and there the gleam of seemingly fine ones is detected for the moment. But nothing can be accurately gauged until the time "when it is filled"; and when the last act of the drama comes, there may be woeful disappointment. So in the sphere of final

moral appraisalment. The run of the words in the original shows emphasis on the "sitting down"—the awe of Judgment. The separation of the good from the bad is singularly painstaking, scrupulously done. The wolf with the sheep's clothing is uncloaked; the hope of the hypocrite shall perish. The orthodox in creed may be the heretic in morals, and *vice versa* the heretic, the orthodox. Even of the followers of Jesus, the saying ever and anon must hold true: All are not Israel who are of Israel. Heaven's judgments are imperative: holiness alone hath honour, the wicked meet their meed in shame.

One thing is certain for all. We are in the net, and the net is being dragged. As life passes, we are carried forward in the crowd, and fates are being fixed. Some, light of heart, disport themselves in the narrowing bounds of the enclosure. Others, rebellious, try to overleap their conditions of environment. Some again, faithlessly overwhelmed by the pressure of adversity, are entangled in the mesh, helpless and unhappy. Cast up on the farther shore, we shall be: there to be strictly valued for moral and spiritual development. Our present actions, good or bad, shall fix our future fate. And the eternal warning abides, as sign-post on life's journey, that it is sin which is the secret of misery; only the holy are the happy in the deep sense. "To them that by patience in well-doing seek for glory and

honour and incorruption," says the apostle, "eternal life: but unto them that are factious, and obey not the truth, but obey unrighteousness, shall be wrath and indignation, tribulation and anguish, upon every soul of man that worketh evil" (Rom. ii. 7-9).

XXVII

THE TALENTS

“A man, going into another country, called his own servants, and delivered unto them his goods. And unto one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one; to each according to his several ability; and he went on his journey. Straightway he that received the five talents went and traded with them, and made other five talents. In like manner he also that received the two gained other two. But he that received the one went away and digged in the earth, and hid his lord's money. Now after a long time the lord of those servants cometh, and maketh a reckoning with them. And he that received the five talents came and brought other five talents, saying, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me five talents: lo, I have gained other five talents. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant: thou has been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. And he also that received the two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: lo, I have gained other two talents. His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord. And he also that had received the one talent came and said, Lord, I knew thee that thou art a hard man, reaping where thou didst not sow, and gathering where thou didst not scatter: and I was afraid, and went away and hid thy talent in the earth: lo, thou hast thine own. But his lord answered and said unto him, Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest that I reap where I sowed not, and gather where I did not scatter; thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the bankers, and at my coming I should have received back mine own with interest. Take ye away therefore the talent from him, and give

it unto him that hath the ten talents. For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away. And cast ye out the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness: there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth."—MATT. xxv. 14-30 (R.V.).

JESUS is never more impressive than when unfolding the laws of our spiritual being: the working principles, so to speak, of our inner life. And this parable of the Talents, simply and directly interpreted, is singularly informing on the subject. The modern mind is keen to know the hidden run of things; and takes the liveliest interest in questions of the soul. Tell us, it says, the standing regulations of ethics written on the heart: those imbedded principles, which the wise will instantly observe. Jesus in His deep way answers here inquiries like that, for He shows us in our own nature a delicate and automatic system of rewards and punishments. Capacity, He demonstrates, if healthily exercised, brings larger capacity; and non-use has the opposite or diminishing effect. People who do not employ a gift, will find in the long-run that they cease to have it. Listen to His summing up, so happily preserved, which constitutes the real key to the tale: "Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away" (ver. 29).

The story is one of servants left in charge, while

their master is gone on his travels. The latter is pictured as absent,¹ simply in order to bring out the idea of responsibility in the former, and it is on the servants that our thoughts are to be fixed. The head of the house knew their capacity, for they had distinct functions in the past with him; and so, when apportioning his goods, he was able to start them on an equal footing—equal, *i.e.*, in the ratio of their respective powers. To a highly capable man, he gave five talents, or in our money, say, a thousand pounds. To another, two, or four hundred; and to a third, one, or two hundred pounds. “To each according to his several ability” (ver. 15). Left to their own resources, two of the servants proved exceedingly trustworthy. The first was so successful in trading that his five talents became ten; and his like-minded neighbour with the two also doubled his capital—his success being exactly equal to that of the first, in proportion to the means

¹ It is only by putting a false accent, or at least a special emphasis, on the phrase, “going into another country,” that an eschatological interpretation can be put upon the parable as it stands. In an earlier Gospel (Mark xiii. 34) there is a simple picture of “a man sojourning in another country, having left his house and given authority to his servants, to each one his work commanded also the porter to watch.” This suggests as the natural history of Matt. chap. xxv., that the first Evangelist invested with the ideas of *watching* and *working* the two independent parables of the Ten Virgins and the Talents—all under shadow of the thought of the Second Coming, to be followed by the Son of Man sitting on the throne of His glory (ver. 31) to judge the nations.

available. But the third servant, in a slavish spirit, showed no activity whatsoever. He went, we are told, and digged in the earth—not an uncommon practice of people in the olden time who played for safety with their treasure—and hid his lord's money. He could not be said, of course, to be wasting the master's substance, but he had no enterprise; he was negligently slothful. The money-power of the talent was absolutely dormant; and though the man's sense of honesty, we shall see, complacently survived, that only went to show that honesty alone does not command success.

And now the master returns to take account. Values emerge, as do also certain notes of high feasting, by way of welcome over the home-coming. And as he reckoned in turn with the servants, the first two, with the beam of happy service in their faces, heard the unstinted commendation: "Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord." Both were at once assured of place and share in the rejoicings of the banqueting-hall. And they received, be it noticed, the same words of approval (vv. 21 and 23), because each had exactly doubled his store. (To fail to note the essential equality in success of the two traders, is to miss the point of the tale.) Then there came to the audit the third servant. Not last to appear from feelings of

reluctance; for there is little about him of the air of the defaulter, as he tables the money: "Lo, thou hast thine own." Yet he virtually accuses, by excusing himself; for he proceeds to ventilate what sounds like an apology. The master had the reputation, he declares, of being exacting: the sort of person who is ready to reap where he has not sown, and to gather grain from which others have blown away the chaff. "I was afraid," he said, "and went away and hid thy talent in the earth." The lord was naturally incensed at this slight or slander on his character, and retorted quickly, judging the man out of his own mouth—You thought me keen and grasping, a difficult-to-please superior? Very well, then, you should have been the more afraid of rebuke from me, and more anxious to meet demands that threatened to be strict! When not putting the money to use yourself, you might at least have lodged it with the bankers, that at my coming I should have received back mine own with interest. Thereupon short shrift was meted out to the offender. He was extruded from the lighted hall, as one who could have no share in the rejoicings. He was declared "the unprofitable servant," and cast "into the outer darkness: there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth" (ver. 30).

And what was done with the talent taken from him? It was given to him who had the ten, not to him who

had now four. This is the crisis of the tale. For the one, on the merits, was just as much entitled to it as the other—the original five talents of the first, and the original two talents of the second, being each doubled, as we saw. The natural chivalrous feeling of most people would be, that if there was this odd talent about, it should go to the man with the more limited capital. In the Lucan version of the story, there are bystanders who pity the less lucky servant. “Lord, he hath ten pounds,” they cry in criticism; as if to say, Why not give it to the man with the smaller fund, who was as successful in proportion, and is just as deserving before God? But the master in his own house, so long as legal requirements are not evaded, can do what he likes with his own—to quote the argument in another tale¹—and can place this signal mark of appreciation where he pleases. The picture, we must not forget, is taken from the world, and deals with one of the fortuitous situations of life. Jesus has a moral to enforce, and is out for something striking in the way of illustration. Nothing will pull His hearers to the point more quickly than paradox. So He gives the derelict talent (token of “abundance”) to the five-talent man; not to the two-talent one, as most people might have done. And before His startled audience has recovered from surprise, He switches them

¹ The Labourers in the Vineyard, p. 127.

into the great world of spiritual facts by enunciating the principle: "Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance: but from him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away" (ver. 29).

This deep law belongs to a realm where no uncertainty prevails and nothing arbitrary is done—the realm of the eternal and invisible. But one could illustrate it by many an instance from the seen and temporal. Money, as the saying goes, makes money, and the rich tend normally to become richer; just as the thriftless, continuing their foolish courses, get confirmed in destitution—the poor tending to become poorer. The model young man who started with a half-sovereign, being shrewd and strenuous, makes his way to fortune by arithmetical, if not geometrical progression. Soon he is the foreman in the prosperous concern; later, the manager; then, to the astonishment of not a few, full-blown managing director. The sprig of a lieutenant, who showed dash in the little sudden skirmish, is exceedingly likely to come out the skilful general in a much bigger fight. To him that hath shall be given. Similarly, in the spiritual sphere, the man who schools himself at home to acts of sacrificing kindness, can pass on, in the big world, to spend and be spent for humanity at large. Or if some time of sternest trial comes, he will be discovered bearing the

cross bravely, and showing marvellous submission. He bore the yoke in his youth well, and now he finds he has the peace of God which passeth understanding.

Conversely, Jesus urges, from him that hath not, shall be taken away even that which he hath. If a man does not exercise his memory, he will soon learn that memory itself fails him. The student who knew several languages at college, makes the unpleasant discovery that now, through rust, he knows not one of them well. Stretch a strong man on a bed of sickness, and soon the hardness of his muscle goes. How pathetic to see the son of toil in hospital, raising the arm to show you that his token of the horny hand has disappeared. So of the higher life in man. People who get neglectful of the daily calls of duty, rapidly degenerate. Evil habits, like intemperance, and what not, are never slow to gain ascendancy. They are like the ivy, which, once rooted, climbs the tree, and kills it at the last. The young folk who have told their first lie, go wonderfully glibly on to tell their second—and their tenth. Those who have become insidiously fond of money, begin by grudging their wonted contributions to philanthropy, and may end as rich but miserable misers—a prey finally to the delusion of the senile, that possessions have all been lost, and they are beggars. All this, in virtue of the awful law implanted in our nature, which the Master has unfolded here.

The fact is, and it is the lesson for all time, that no one in life can stand still. If we are not progressing, we are retrograding before God. In the religious world itself, there is a melancholy class, who seem to be spinning beautifully one way, like a boy's top, but are in fact moving bodily the other. And the situation is aggravated by being girt about with complacency, like the man who hid his talent, and thought at the day of reckoning to give it back undiminished on demand. How vain the self-righteousness of those who serve God according to a formal system, and think they have done all! It is on a par with the fatuous folly of those who would fain cover the thought of their own age, by iteration of the verbal symbols of ancient days, which are but the record of controversies that are dead. Discerning minds, which grasp on historic lines the situation of the Gospel page, have no difficulty in understanding the invective of Jesus, aimed at the ecclesiastical opponents of His time. The seed of truth lay to their hand—it had come down from the prophets—but it could never grow till it was sown in a soil of free tilth, there to be blessed by the sunshine, and watered by the rain of heaven. Instead of sowing, however, on living lines, they cherished the old truth mechanically; with the result that it shrivelled to a husk, in which the germ was killed. They themselves might be full of negative proprieties, but they were glorying in a

mere semblance of spiritual power, and even that which they had was taken away from them. Religion became hollow and hypocritical: a mere pretence of reaping where they had not sown. We are not all five-talent men, and many have not so much as two; but the point is, that even the man with the solitary talent could have done just as well as the others, *i.e.* doubled the grant. There are diversities of gifts, says the apostle, but the same spirit; and in the latter sphere, blessed be God, there is absolute equality. That is a consideration to be treasured, in connection with the phrase in the story: "To each according to his several ability." The tools to him that can handle them, might become a Christian motto. The Gospel armoury is open to all, and the seemingly worse-trained soldier can sometimes beat the regulation pattern. There is no discharge in that war. We have to go on to the close of earthly strife, but we should do it under the great Captain's rules, as they are here displayed. Cultivate diligently, He says, the graces of the Christian life, and the result will be greater susceptibility than ever to higher things. Indifference, on the other hand, will not end in itself: the callous soon betray diminished receptivity. If a sword is never out of the scabbard, it rusts; and the saddest cases in religion are those that start fair, but enterprise nothing. Innate law is bound to prevail, in both aspects of the matter.

Most encouraging, on the one hand; for it promises regarding real life, with a power that cannot fail, "Unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance"; but gravely warning, on the other, for it adds: "From him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away."

XXVIII

THE BARREN FIG-TREE

“A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard ; and he came seeking fruit thereon, and found none. And he said unto the vine-dresser, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none : cut it down ; why doth it also cumber the ground ? And he answering saith unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it : and if it bear fruit thenceforth, well ; but if not, thou shalt cut it down.”—LUKE xiii. 6-9 (R.V.).

“EVERY tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.” This is the general principle of Jesus, recorded independently in the Sermon on the Mount. Individuals, and movements among men, are tested by results, just as fruit-trees are known by their produce. But here, in a new story, He leaves the personal sphere, and turns His eye to the Jewish nation as a whole. He has thoughts, we can see, of short-comings in its past history, and virtually describes the public situation of His own day as ominous. He feels intensely that the near future for Israel is going to be fateful. And the principle at

stake, now as ever, is this: "If the tree bear fruit, well; if not, thou shalt cut it down."

Once upon a time there was a man who had a fig-tree in his vineyard. The place, as the name implies, was meant normally for vines, and the law was clear that vineyards were not to be sown with "divers seeds." But a spare spot had been given to this fig—a tree which even in the stoniest quarters has a knack of flourishing. Not that the one referred to was a random growth, such as men meet with on the waysides of the East. It was there of favour, and had been specially "planted" in the great garden, where soil and exposure gave prospect of excellent results. Free and fair it stood upon the sunlit slope, an object from the first of high-class cultivation. The passing stranger individualised it at once, in its position of privilege, studded among surrounding vines. And at due season the owner came, seeking fruit thereon: no doubt with sanguine expectation, seeing it had been choicely selected, and carefully tended in his well-warded, well-tilled orchard. But when he arrived with the vine-dresser, and halted beneath its shadow, gazing wistfully up into the branches—where the fruit is sometimes hard to distinguish amid the leaves—disappointment overspread his countenance. Look high or look low, scan the sunny side or search the shady, the tree was barren. And straightway, betraying

pardonable chagrin, he pronounced sentence of execution. "Behold," he cried, "these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground?" It is a wretched specimen; not worthy of the name of fruit-tree, when it does not bear fruit. And it exhausts the soil. Another tree might flourish there, and be bountiful. Down with it at once!

But the dresser was a man of hope, and loth to take his axe in hand. His own favourite emblem was the spade. We detect in him a certain fondness for the tree. He might be found occasionally, like Nathaniel, beneath its shade. I verily believe he had a seat there, and leant his tools of husbandry against the trunk, or lay outstretched below its leafy limbs in the noon-heat of the day. At any rate, he plied his best professional arguments when interceding with the master. It might have a tendency to wood, and foliage to a fault; still, he saw signs of latent power, with his gardener's eye. If it were root-pruned, and a fertilising agent added, the evil might be cured. "Lord," he cried, "let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it." And the intercession prevailed; for the suggestion is tacitly adopted, although only on the implied condition that, if failure continue, the axe will gleam in the air, and fall with sharp strokes on the hard stem of the offender. "If it bear fruit

thenceforth, well; but if not, thou shalt cut it down." The story ends thus, with seeming abruptness. But that is part of the art; for the very vagueness of the situation, as left, helps the mind to feel that the future of the fig-tree hangs in the balance. It has been as good as marked on the bark, for felling, by the woodman, and is in a truly critical condition. There is a blank past to be atoned for, a strictly limited future to improve. Woe betide it, if the unfruitfulness persist—it shall be cut down as a "cumberer of the ground."

All this pictures vividly the relation of our Lord's countrymen to the sparing mercies of God. Israel truly was a fig-tree planted in Jehovah's vineyard, and with peculiar care. No other race had been so deeply rooted in spiritual truth, or given more notable opportunity of realising the gracious rule of God. As they were themselves wont to boast, there was no people to whom God was so near, or who had such lofty laws, or with whom He had so bountifully dealt (cf. Deut. iv. 7, 8; xxxiii. 26–29; Ps. cxlvii. 20). They had been brought out of Egypt, while yet a tender plant (Ps. lxxx.), and been established in the goodly heritage of Canaan. Added to higher forms of worship, God had supplied them with rulers, and above all raised up prophets, to warn them against evil, and to guide them in His ways. What nursing

and tending, if they bethought them of their past history, could have been more careful? Such stirring of the soil, such feeding at the root, such pruning and watering of the tree. But where were the precious fruits of the spirit, resulting from this goodness of God, in providence and grace? What was the outcome of it all, in the practical realm? Nothing, comparatively speaking. Jehovah, like the owner at the three years' end, had to complain in sorrow and anger, that they were a people who erred in their hearts, and would not know God's ways. He had to say of their countless and costly sacrifices: "They are vain oblations: I cannot away with them." In the midst of their religiosity, they were omitting the weighty and essential matters of the law—justice, mercy, faith. And the obduracy seemed incurable, for the evil was a thing of centuries. But the sacrosanct character of their nation, depend upon it, would not save them in the hour of judgment, any more than does the sacredness of the fig as a tree. When the long-suffering God comes, at the end of the age, and looks longingly for the fruit of true holiness, if He "find none," the stern stroke of retribution must descend, and the commonwealth lose its position of privilege. The dread sentence shall go forth: "Cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground?"

Although, as the story closes, the tree is still

spared, the central impression is a feeling of grave apprehension that the final crisis for the chosen people is at hand. The fascination of the parable is our sense of a certain subdued throb of emotion in the breast of Jesus, as He spoke. The decisive issue, He knows, cannot long be delayed. The last stage of warning and kindly offices of help, is fast passing. Witness the appeals made by John the Baptist and Himself. His own unconcealed apprehension is, that the fate of His country is trembling in the balance. We have a parallel lesson, indeed, on the subject—a parallel in the realm of action—in the unforgettable picture of Jesus seated on the slopes of Olivet, when He beheld the city and wept over it: the Jerusalem which would take no warnings, which rejected and even slew those that were sent unto it—the Jerusalem which at this moment, as His heart told him, was going on blindly and madly to its fate.

That thoughts like these are strong in the mind of the recording Evangelist, is evident from the grouped sayings of Jesus in the verses immediately preceding. There were two notorious catastrophes, of recent occurrence, which pointed the very moral which the parable more solemnly defines. Some turbulent countrymen from the north created a disturbance in the Temple precincts, and so came into collision with the Roman Guard under Pilate. Blood was shed, and

it "mingled with their sacrifices" (ver. 1)—the human gore intermixed with that of the victims newly offered on the altar. All this was fine food for the superstitions of the vulgar. Here were men whom, even amid the acts of worship, vengeance suffered not to live. The very sanctuary, where men fled for refuge and felt safe, could not save them. But these hapless Galileans, Jesus points out, were presumably no worse than their fellows; and instead of being particularistic, as they are too apt to be, in their interpretation of the acts of God, and gloating on the supposed enormities of their neighbours, men should be severe in the less convenient criticism of themselves. The true moral of the incident should be broadened into a lesson for the whole Jewish generation of the day. Divine judgments are maturing, and the State is in a precarious position. God had borne with His people long and patiently, receiving exceeding small return in the shape of that personal holiness which He loves. Sure as night follows day, if this unfruitfulness continue, their place of privilege among the nations is doomed—"except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish" (ver. 3).

And the same inference is to be drawn from the other incident, which befell, not hated and obscure Galileans, but favoured dwellers in the Capital itself. Some turret on the city wall, near the pool of Siloam,

suddenly gave way, and overwhelmed eighteen of the inhabitants in the débris. "Think ye," He asks, "that they were offenders above all the men that dwell in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay; but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (ver. 5). Rightly interpreted, a calamity like that is but another muttering of the storm which threatens to become general. Dark clouds of destiny are hovering above the hills of Zion. And instead of condescending upon the peculiar guilt of the few, you should fear lest the arm of vengeance is going to descend in deadly strokes upon all. The period of probation for our favoured race cannot be indefinitely prolonged, and the Judge who is behind all such judgments will not allow us to escape, if we do not mend our ways. It will not be a limb here, and a limb there—a broken branch in Galilee or another at Jerusalem—but the whole tree shall be laid low. The test is, the fruits of good living—the fruits meet for repentance—and if these be still wanting, we shall in just judgment be cut down as cumberers of the ground.

We know from history that the tree soon afterwards was stricken. Jerusalem fell in 70 A.D. When our Evangelist, therefore, was fixing the narrative as we have it, he and the Christians from whom he received the story were looking back on closed events. Parable, as usual, tended towards allegory; and no doubt

Jesus, in the most edifying way, seemed in their eyes to be the Dresser in the vineyard, who had interceded for the last respite. Let Me preach to them, He cried, My Gospel, and try to touch their hardened hearts; let Me tell them of the things that belong unto their peace, ere these be hid for ever from their eyes. And by the issue of this added era of probation, I too am contented to abide. If at last they become spiritual in aspiration, and bring forth the fruits of the Spirit, great is the gain, blessed the result. But if not—if they persist in their perversions of tradition and hanker after a carnal kingdom, in which the Jew is to be exalted and the Gentile abased, instead of the Kingdom which is not of this world—then their blood be on their own heads. Let their earthly ambitions entangle them in civil complications and in war. Let the Roman arise to put down the disorder, and his reeking sword descend like that of Pilate; let their walls, like the tower in Siloam, totter to the foundation, and overwhelm them in ruin. The Kingdom of God, quite justly, shall be “taken from them, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Matt. xxi. 43).

In universal history, the principle persists. Pity the nations that forget God. His vineyard is too valuable, the space too precious, for trees to be harboured that are unfruitful. Our own British nation, of a Gentile stock, is a fig-tree graciously reared within the bounds.

Fruit from us, in the form of holy service, the great Owner has a right to expect, and time after time He comes seeking it. Are we hardened and impenitent, like these Hebrews of old? The Spirit shall not always strive. Jesus was marvellously patient, but sometimes He blazed forth in righteous indignation at those whose unfruitfulness, compared with their pretensions, amounted to hypocrisy. Once, near the close of His career, He trod at early morn the path from Bethany that took Him to Jerusalem. He spied a fig-tree in the distance, which was luxuriant with leaves, and it awoke hope in His heart that there might be fruit thereon of which He could refreshingly partake. But He found none. Was not this an emblem of the religious world of His day? Ample privilege, yielding scant results. Gorgeous ritual, ending in neither humility nor charity. Much was mere pointless and garish display. And what if we are duplicating the situation, in a fashion all our own? With no exalted and exalting faith: no fair fruit shining on the topmost branches of our lives. Our solemn observance of ordinances, mere leaves of false promise—a garnishing of religious respectability. Here, in a memorable story, of wonderful power, we have the warning for all time. The axe, with gleaming edge, is held above the tree. If it bring not forth fruit, the cry ever and anon will resound: “Cut it down; why doth it also cumber the ground?”

XXIX

THE WICKED HUSBANDMEN

“A man planted a vineyard, and set a hedge about it, and digged a pit for the winepress, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into another country. And at the season he sent to the husbandmen a servant, that he might receive from the husbandmen of the fruits of the vineyard. And they took him, and beat him, and sent him away empty. And again he sent unto them another servant ; and him they wounded in the head, and handled shamefully. And he sent another ; and him they killed : and many others ; beating some, and killing some. He had yet one, a beloved son : he sent him last unto them, saying, They will reverence my son. But those husbandmen said among themselves, This is the heir ; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance shall be ours. And they took him, and killed him, and cast him forth out of the vineyard. What therefore will the lord of the vineyard do ? he will come and destroy the husbandmen, and will give the vineyard unto others.”—MARK xii. 1-9 (R.V.).

In the palmy days of Palestine one of the attractive sights must have been the vineyards, hanging graceful on the sun-beaten slopes. One of these, we are bidden think of : planted with the choice Syrian grape, and tricked out in all the details of gardening art. The owner gathered out the stones, and thoroughly prepared the soil. He fenced the whole with stone or

quickset, to keep out those common enemies of the vine, the wild boar and the fox. And he hewed out a place for the wine-press, a cool hollow in the rock, into which the grape juice ran, when crushed through the grating by the feet of men: a hollow from which it was afterwards taken in bulk, for fermentation and preserving. He built the usual tower: storehouse for the implements, shelter for the watchman and the workmen. And the whole place being thus ordered and established, he let it out to husbandmen: the customary bargain being, that they should pay the owner so much produce in the year. And then, hopeful of the issue of his venture, he sought residence abroad.

Meanwhile the year moved on upon its wonted way. Spring passed, modest and gentle in her mantle green; and God who makes His sun to shine upon the evil and upon the good, visited the vineyard with soft refreshing showers. There was budding of the vines upon the slope; and although thorns and briars might threaten to start up, the growing plants joyed in the genial sunlight, waved their green leaves in the wind, and gave promise of a precious fruitage in the time of harvest. A bunch of swelling size was here and there to be seen, however neglected the ground, or badly pruned the shoots, or downtrodden the ring-fence. The thoughts of the owner, once

again, turned to his holding on the hill, as autumn was seen approaching, gathering in ample arms her richest spoil. He was clearly entitled to look for a generous return from the well-favoured spot; but messenger after messenger, going for the fruits, was contumeliously treated—one beaten, a second wounded in the head, a third killed. Many others, it is added, were dispatched on the same errand; but still the report ran, that they were shamefully handled and sent empty away, “beating some, and killing some” (ver. 5). These were defiant doings, but having yet one left, his son whom he loved, he sent him last unto them, saying, “They will reverence my son.” Desperate situations require desperate remedies, and short of going himself, none could represent the rightful owner better than a son. The respect due to the father should have been given by the ruffians to the lad. But his superior standing did not save him from a miserable fate; for the insolent underlings, when they saw him solitary and defenceless, caught at the idea of cutting clear of responsibility altogether. “This is the heir,” they cried; “come, let us kill him, and the inheritance shall be ours.” Seized and flung from the vineyard, the hapless youth lay bruised and bleeding, his body soon cold in death upon the highway. What will the owner do speedily with such rebels, his rightful dues evaded, and his heart-strings

torn? The majesty of the law comes in, when patience is at last exhausted. Offenders who go from one crime to another become fatuous in folly, and rush blindly to their fate. He will come, we are told, and destroy the husbandmen as villains of the deepest dye, and will give the vineyard unto others.

This is a tremendous story, and shows Jesus singularly near the prophets in essential circumstance and personal feeling. The imagery reminds one directly of Isaiah (v. 1-7), where the vineyard on the fruitful hill, bringing forth only sour grapes, loses its characteristic appointments and is laid waste. Jesus, like that warning voice, prophesies the downfall of His nation, with more to lose this time. His critics are becoming intense in opposition; and He broadens the charge against them by declaring that their conduct is of a piece with the treatment accorded to speakers for God in the past. The whole discourse is an incisive review of the history of God's long-suffering with Israel and her ungrateful and obtuse leaders. Jehovah brought a vine out of Egypt, and cast out the heathen and prepared before it (Ps. lxxx.). The men of Judah were his pleasant plant. He caused it to take deep root, and it filled the land. The hills were covered with its shadow, and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedar. He looked down from heaven, and beheld, and visited His vine. What more,

cries the prophet (Isa. v. 4), could have been done for the vineyard? The great God of heaven was expectant of His people's fruit of praise. But they ill-requested all His gracious care: the ruling classes in particular proving blinded, worldly, and fanatical. Mercy, as opposed to animal sacrifices, holiness in contrast to the works of the law, were products scant in their season. The prophets, accredited messengers of the owner of the vineyard, looked for justice, but behold oppression; for righteousness, but behold a cry. The leaders clutched at privilege ("the inheritance shall be ours"), but neglected duty. They were rude and obscurantist to those who urged the more spiritual view. Nearly all were violently treated, and as history proceeded, the insolence showed no tendency to abate. Elijah, the persecuted wanderer, wished he were dead; Isaiah was sawn asunder; Jeremiah was stoned. How pathetic the summary of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword" (xi. 36, 37).

All which aggravated condition of the body politic was surely working to a bitter penalty. As little for nations as for individuals, can Nemesis be indefinitely delayed. A volume of many weary chapters was drawing to a close; and all the signs of the times

pointed to an approaching crisis in the State. Jesus felt solemnly that the cup of Israel's iniquity, in resisting the sovereignty of God's will, was about full. What the new régime will be, He is too spiritual in the manner of His thinking to attempt to specify. He is no cunning augur, ready with oracular details for His crowd. But of one thing He is absolutely certain; the result will mark, now as of old, advances in the Kingdom's cause. This last, as the one eternal interest of man, shall be reset in a new phase of moral progress; for God never bares His arm in signal acts of judgment, without displaying with increasing power His true sovereignty. In other words, impending changes in the State, whatever their exact course, should mean advance in the spiritual plane. Righteousness shall flourish in the future in more kingly fashion, as the Gospel influence extends. Jesus may seem sad as He reviews the past, but He is ever sanguine as regards the nobler days that are to come in God's hands, and in God's good time. Already over the doomed city He had shed the silent tear, and in the story of the fig-tree showed presage of changes in the air. Dark disaster, to every seeing eye, could be discerned on the horizon. But these things, it is His faith invincible, are but the birth-throes of a new life for man, when God, as in a better-managed vineyard, shall take power unto

Himself and reign. The chosen race may lose their place of privilege in the crash, victims to their own wayward folly. But God would still rule among the nations, and a new and more obedient people arise, to testify His grace. Coming history, as we might put it, would overleap the narrow interests of the ecclesiasticism of the day: a system of whose harsh authority He and the Baptist had been made to feel the power. God, however, is never left without a seed to serve Him; and Man being the medium of His noblest manifestation to the world, the great cause of Humanity increasingly prevails. This is the grave sentence which Jesus is promulgating in the story: sounding it in the ears of those whose fathers persecuted the prophets, and who were themselves shortly to become the betrayers and murderers of Himself. The vineyard is to pass to new hands, who will render the fruits in their season. "What therefore will the lord of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the husbandmen, and will give the vineyard unto others" (ver. 9).

Clearly, in addition to the idea of Judgment, there is in the parable a certain intense note of personal feeling and foreboding. Tragic events, we now know, followed in its wake—the apprehension, the trial, the cruel death of Jesus on the Cross. Easily and naturally, therefore, the story soon became a poignant

allegory for the Early Church. Jesus was thought of as the Son who had been at God's right hand; the Son who came to our lower world on His errand of mercy; the Son who faced sinful opposition even to the giving of His life on the accursed tree. It is out of a period of throbbing thoughts like these, that the parable has come down to us as it stands. But treated strictly as parable, and not originally an allegory, it would be uncritical to think that the son in the story was meant to be interpreted as a heavenly figure. What is suggested, in the earthly aspect, is the most recent and most emphatic act of long-suffering on the part of the owner of the vineyard, and the lingering faith he still had, in his good-hearted way, in the husbandmen. Just as the supreme form of the sacrificing spirit in Abraham was his readiness to offer up his only and beloved son, Isaac, so the final touch of the divine forbearance toward Israel was the appeal made in these last days by speakers like Jesus and John. The Baptist, we can see, was much present in the thoughts of our Lord at this time, speaking as He does out of the shadow of His own approaching fate. John had been the recent victim, and He Himself would be the next—the latest innovating heretic, who must be instantly put down. Poor hide-bound husbandmen, in the name of religion repelling religion from the people's doors. Jesus feels

and knows, and as good as says, that His career is to end like that of John, and countless others. But He fears not, as He enters into the cloud. He lived ever in conscious fellowship with God; lived the life of communion and confidence, as of a son with a father; one who knew the Heavenly Father's will, and could accept it. It is more and more borne in upon Him that He has to take up the cross, and lay down His life, a sacrifice to seal a noble cause. His blood will be the sanction of the heart-covenant¹ to come: blood speaking of the life with God which all will share who follow in His train. The circumstances of the moment are solemn beyond measure—the past being relentlessly reviewed, and a stern statement of the judgment that must come being intimated. But there is marvellous composure in the heart of Jesus as He faces His own approaching fate. The deepening hatred of His opponents rings Him round, and we see them massed darkling in the background. Why, the dastards at that moment were hatching their plot: the gloomy night is gathering fast. But Jesus, however touched with emotion in the under-note, is full of calmest courage. He goes forward, faith-

¹ "The Law writ within: not standing as a hard taskmaster over our head, but impressed within as a sweet principle in our hearts, and working from thence naturally" (Leighton). On the nature of this New Testament, *vide* Jer. xxxi. 31-34. And on the function of the blood in connection with such covenants, *vide* Ex. xxiv.

ful and submissive, to the final conflict of the Passion.

There is warning here for all time. The mere honesty of the opposition of these learned and highly proper men to the message of Jesus, cannot save their reputation. They stand condemned for lack of insight, in the matter of the essential necessities of God's Kingdom in their own generation. They were intellectually complacent. They failed in tender evangelical feeling, and were pitiably intolerant toward others more truly in the light. They were not without spiritual instinct, for religion was their high concern; but they gave it no play in the fresh air of freedom. Rather they headed off its exercise into channels which were frost-bound. Are there no wrong-headed husbandmen to-day? The slaves of hard tradition; blandly confident of being in the line of succession from the apostles, and unchurching other workers, under fiat of loud-sounding authority. Are God's messengers, in an age of active thought, as widely recognised as they might be, by those who seem to be somewhat? Is there no vain tilting at the sure conclusions of Science? What about venerable ritual, so loaded with antique dogma, that it does not meet the living situation of the day? If some new Luther were to start up, fired with faith in fresh-discovered knowledge of the Bible, not all that

ought would do him reverence. Those most loudly Protestant, might show very little of the Protestant spirit; and if he escaped persecution, it might only be because intolerance in old age has lost its fangs. The most appalling test for every church official is this—Which side would he have taken at the crucifixion of the Master? The Critical Movement, it is now happily acknowledged, though it might seem for long too negative in result, has been a blessing in disguise; and modern opportunities for spiritual cultivation are wonderfully enriched—implements improved, the soil deeper than was thought, and conditions of climate upon the whole sunny. But singularly crucial, now as of old, remains the question of the true reading of the Christ. That the position of Jesus is supreme in the realm of faith, and this on grounds conformable to right reason, the author of these expositions cannot doubt. It is in this firm belief, indeed, that he has etched off in these pages the pictures of the parables, and tried to bring them, for fireside reading, up to date in the matter of interpretation. The mighty stone which the builders rejected, has indeed become the head of the corner. And it is for individuals in every age to apply the test, in scrupulously searching fashion, to their heart of hearts, and to be fully persuaded in their own minds. Do they rise from the study of

Jesus, touched to the finer issues of life? Are they braced to high sacrifice? Do they find that day by day, and in the mood of joy, they spend and are spent for that which is God's glory, because His self-revealing, namely, the advancement of Man by the triumph of His rule? All, of course, on the lines of the great Exemplar Himself, the Leader of the new Humanity. And this tested, like the vineyard on the hill, by produce; the precious fruits of the Spirit. Some, no doubt, like the wicked husbandmen, will go on glorying, consciously or unconsciously, in insult and ingratitude. But these, mayhap, may discover the lesson, that a stone thrown down and neglected can become, amid the rank undergrowth that supervenes, a stone of stumbling. When eventually raised aloft, it is revered in its true place of power. But even there it can be a rock of offence, like a missile in ancient warfare, thrown down from the bulwarks of a castle wall. Truth, trifled with, recoils with deadly effect on the offender; the penalty of Judgment from on high eternally is there. As the Evangelist declares, carrying on the wholesome thought (ver. 10), by quotation from an ancient Psalm: "On whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder."

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